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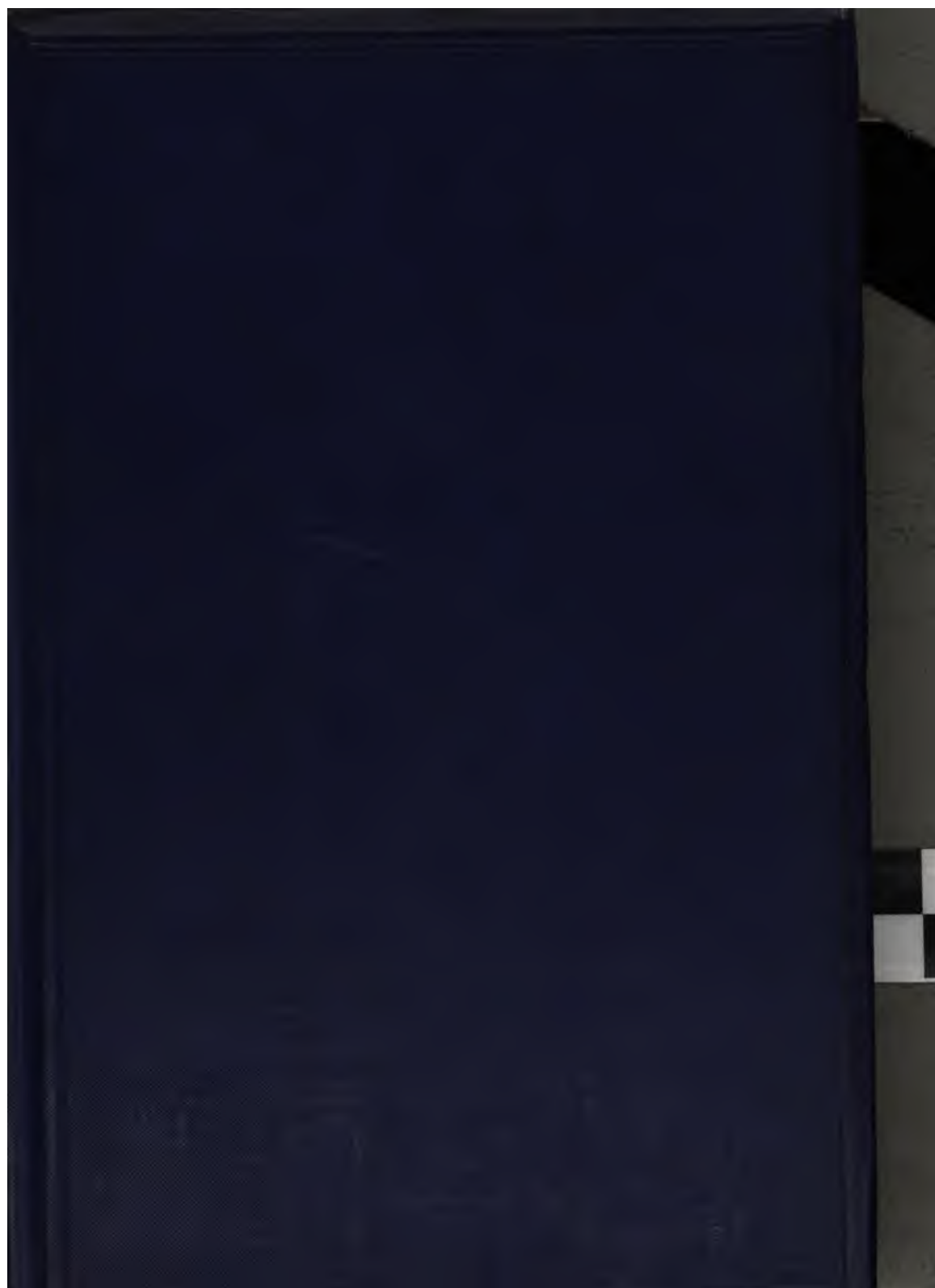
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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

| | |
|--|------|
| I. | PAGE |
| THE GAOL, | 7 |
| II. | |
| REGINALD'S HISTORY, | 22 |
| III. | |
| THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, | 47 |
| IV. | |
| ANNIE BROOK, | 62 |
| V. | |
| THE REFUGE, | 79 |
| VI. | |
| THE CLOUDS BEGIN TO GATHER, | 110 |

| VII. | | PAGE |
|--|--|------|
| MRS. DORRELL, | | 122 |
| VIII. | | |
| THE LOST FOUND, | | 156 |
| IX. | | |
| THE LAST STRUGGLE, | | 177 |
| X. | | |
| CHARITY SUFFERETH LONG, AND IS KIND, . . . | | 202 |

CHAPTER I.

THE GAOL.

ERNESTINE COURTENAY stood that same afternoon at the gate of the gaol, waiting an answer to her summons. She looked up to the high massive walls which hid the building, and the ponderous door, with its ominous bolts and bars, and the grated loophole through which the turnkey inspected her before he opened it ; and she smiled involuntarily as she thought of Lady Beaufort's horror and indignation could she have seen her niece in such a position. Her order at once gained her admission, and walking through an enclosure laid out as a garden, where a few sickly flowers strove to blossom in the perpetual shade of the high walls, she was ushered into the governor's room. He was seated writing at a table,—a tall rough-looking old man, with a keen eye, which had scanned her from head to foot before she had been two minutes in his presence. Her appearance seemed to propitiate him,

for he very graciously asked her to sit down, and proceeded to read her order. He looked up sharply at her when he had done so.

‘This is not a common order,’ he said. ‘You don’t want to see one of those gals in particular, and you can’t be come just to look at the whole lot, as if they were wild beasts in a show; so if you’ll just tell me what you’re up to, ma’am, we shall get on a deal better and quicker.’

‘I will, gladly. Mr. Thorold told me you would help me in a matter I am anxious about.’

‘Mr. Thorold advised you to come here, did he? then it’s all right. He is a trump, he is; not one of your stuck-up parsons, talking out of a book, as stiff as a poker. Would you like to know what Mr. Thorold did once?’ he continued, veering round on his chair so as to face Ernestine. ‘There was a thundering blackguard here committed for manslaughter; he had hit a publican such a knock on the head that he killed his man then and there. Well, he was just like a devil when we got him in here. He knocked down one of the turnkeys, and squared up at me; only I had the handcuffs on him before he knew where he was, and it took the lot on us to get him into the black-hole.’

‘The black-hole?’ said Ernestine inquiringly.

‘That’s where we locks them up when they’re rampagious ; ’taint a pleasant place, I can tell you. Well, he was a-howling there like a hippopotamus’ (it struck Ernestine that a howling hippopotamus was a curiosity in natural history, but she made no comment), ‘and banging the door as if he’d have had it down ; and Mr. Thorold, he had come in to see one of the other prisoners. “What’s that ?” says he to me, when he heard the row. I told him. “Now, Bolton,” says he, “I’ll tell you what : you’re going to let me into the black-hole to speak to that man.” “Lord bless you, sir,” says I, “you must not think of such a thing ; why, he’ll fell you like an ox.” “Not a bit of it,” says he ; “come, you take and open the door for me.” “Just as you please,” says I, for I could not help liking his pluck ; “but if you once goes in, you’ll have to stay there an hour, for I’ve got to go out, and I can’t give the key of the black-hole to no one.” “All right,” says he ; “I’ll stay.” “But I must lock you up,” says I. “Lock me up,” says he ; and so I did ; and whatever he did to the fellow, I can’t tell you, but I went back in an hour’s time, and the prisoner was sitting on the floor, crying like a baby, and Mr. Thorold was leaning over him, comforting him as tender as might be.’

‘I am very glad you have told me that, Mr. Bolton,’

said Ernestine, 'for I like to think there are such people in the world.'

'There's not too many of them,' said the gaolér, nodding his héad sententiously. 'Well now, your business, ma'am?'

'It is just this: I want to find a young girl who has gone astray in Greyburgh. Her name is Annie Brook. I have never seen her, but I have her picture; and Mr. Thorold said that even if she were not amongst the prisoners here, you, or some of the women, might recognise it.'

'It's very likely; let's have a look at it.'

Ernestine gave him the sketch of the pretty smiling face, with the waving hair and the wreath of flowers. The old man looked at it long and earnestly.

'I have seen this face,' he said at last; 'but not in here. I have seen it in the streets. She is new to the trade most probably, and has not been took up yet.'

'And do you think you can help me to find her?' said Ernestine eagerly.

'We'll find her if she is in Greyburgh, ma'am, I'll be bound. They all find their way here sooner or later; but we'll try if the girls know her; it's pretty sure they do, if she is one of their sort.'

'I fear there is little doubt she is,' said Ernestine.

‘Then you’ll not expect to see her look like this?’ he said, pointing to the sweet innocent face in the sketch. ‘She’ll have got a bit more brazen before now, you may depend. Here, missus,’ he shouted, and a fat old woman came waddling into the room at his call. ‘This here lady wants to go and see the gals; give me your keys, and I’ll take her in myself.’

‘Going to see the gals, are you, ma’am?’ said Mrs. Bolton. ‘Ah! you’d not take a step to see them, if you had as much of them as I have. I am a’most out of my mind with their cantrips.’

‘A val-ay-ble woman that, ma’am,’ said the gaoler, drawing himself up, and flourishing his hand towards his wife; ‘five years older than I am, and I’m no chicken, and to see how she cuts about after these vixens, it is a beautiful sight, ma’am, beautiful! The experience I have had in the female sex since I came within these walls is wonderful; you wouldn’t credit it. I thought when I came here that women were all made of cheeny and glass; but, bless you! I have had reason to change my opinion. There’s some of them it would be worse to meet than a roaring lion, when their blood’s up. Why, I had a woman here, six feet in her stocking-soles, committed for trying to ram a red-hot poker down her husband’s throat, and he a corporal six feet

two. She said she had warned him of her sentiments about his staying out after dark, and she made his tea every blessed night, with the poker heating in the fire for him, till she caught him tripping, and then she was at him like a Philistine. But here are the keys, ma'am. This way.'

He rose, keys in hand, and marched in front of her, while Ernestine followed, thinking, with no small amusement, how Hugh Lingard would laugh at the new lights she was gaining in her present adventures. They passed through a heavy door, turning on a pivot, into a dreary stone passage, and having traversed various parts of the building, all gloomier and colder than anything Ernestine had ever imagined, they reached a small paved courtyard surrounded by high walls, where the female prisoners had just been turned out to exercise. The governor told Ernestine as they went on that the women who were sent there by the university authorities were always kept apart from those committed for theft or other offences, and therefore that all now before her were of that doomed class. For a moment Ernestine shrank from raising her eyes to any one of them, but, conquering the painful feeling which oppressed her, she turned towards them with a gentle imploring look, which would have told them, could they have read it

aright, how much she hoped they would not suppose she had come there to scorn and humble them, and compare the honour and purity which shielded her own life, with the unspeakable degradation of theirs. Some eighteen or twenty women were before her, of all ages, from the hard callous-looking woman of more than thirty, to the mere child of fourteen. All possessed at least some trace of the beauty which had been at once their treasure and their curse, but in not one, even the youngest, was there the least remains of the freshness, the innocence, the frankness of youth and girlhood. It seemed to Ernestine as if they belonged not only to a distinct class, but to a separate race. Gathered as they were from different parts of the country, there was in one and all of them the same restless, unsatisfied expression, the same quick impulsiveness, with a bright keenness of look like that of some wild animal whose life depends on the winning of difficult prey; nor had she been long in their presence before she saw that sudden bursts of wild gaiety, diversified by intervals of sullen misery, characterized them all alike. Some there were, however, in whose eyes the lurking agony was more clearly visible than in others, while the younger girls seemed capable of keeping up, even amongst themselves, a reckless, mirthful excitement

which compelled oblivion of the darker thoughts that would one day overwhelm them altogether. Ernestine felt heart-sick as she gazed at them, for these were all human beings, whom even the world called 'lost,' and were they indeed to be lost for ever? She was trying with her whole heart to save one of them, but were all these to be allowed to go their way without a hand stretched out to stay their perishing?

The appearance of a lady was evidently an unwonted sight, and the smallest event an excitement in their dreary imprisonment. They crowded together, gazing at Ernestine with eager looks. She soon found she was expected to play her part in a small drama, which the astute governor originated for the occasion.

'Yes, ma'am, this is our exercise-ground,' he said, with a wave of his hand. 'Male prisoners walk here at one, female prisoners at two o'clock. We are careful of their health, ma'am; you shall go through their cells presently.'

'I am glad they have a little fresh air,' said Ernestine.

'O yes, ma'am, and I gives them every indulgence in my power, when they behaves steady and does their oakum properly. Have you all picked your full quantity this morning?' he added, turning to the women.

'Yes, sir,' they answered in chorus.

‘Then I’ll give you a treat, and let you see this pretty picture,’ and he held out Annie’s portrait. With a shriek of delight they rushed forward, and crowded round him to look at it. For a moment there was a silence, then a shout from two or three, ‘Why, it’s Rosie Brown!’

‘Well, to be sure, and so it is,’ said another.

‘It’s Rosie, only prettier,’ said a fourth.

‘Ah, that’s the flowers sets her off,’ said another; and so on, one and all agreeing on the identity of the portrait. Ernestine remembered Thorold had told her of the probable change of name. Brown was just what Annie might have been expected to choose, and very likely Mr. Brown himself had given the name of Rose to the sweet blushing face represented in the sketch.

‘Yes, it is Rosie Brown,’ said the gaoler. ‘I thought you would know it. It’s like her, ain’t it? But this was done before she came to Greyburgh.’

‘Any one may see that,’ said a girl; ‘Rosie looks ever so much older now.’

‘Oh, can you tell me where she is at present,’ exclaimed Ernestine eagerly.

‘There! you’ve been and spoiled all,’ muttered the gaoler.

‘Yes, sure,’ said one of the younger girls, ‘she is at Mother Dor—’

She was interrupted before she completed the name by a companion, who twitched her sleeve, while a sharp glance towards Ernestine, and a look of intelligence among themselves passed round the circle.

‘Rosie Brown,’ said the woman who had stopped the other; ‘oh, she is gone away; been gone ever so long; don’t live anywhere near Greyburgh now.’

‘Polly Smith, if you’ve got nothing but lies to tell, you’ll be pleased to hold your tongue,’ said the gaoler.

‘Law bless you, Mr. Bolton,’ said a slim black-eyed girl, springing half across the yard towards him, ‘don’t you know as Rosie went off in a coach and six, quite grand and respectable? There was a gentleman inside, with a cocked-hat, and I think it must have been the Mayor.’

‘Lydia Merrit, if you dares to give me any of your chaff, you’ll be locked up, that’s all. Ma’am, I’ll show you over the rest of the gaol, if you please now; there’s nothing more to see here.’

He held the door open for Ernestine, and she could not choose but go towards it, her expressive face shadowed by sorrow at the thought that her own indiscretion had defeated her object. A sad-eyed girl, who had remained silent from the first, was watching

Ernestine intently. Suddenly she went towards her, and whispered in a low voice—

‘You mean nothing but good to Rosie, don’t you?’

‘Nothing, nothing but good,’ said Ernestine anxiously.

‘Then you’ll find her at Mother Dorrell’s in Priory Lane.’

Oh, thank you,’ said Ernestine, pressing the girl’s hand. A look of astonishment passed into the careworn faded face as the woman felt the touch of that soft white hand. She watched Ernestine till the last fold of her dress disappeared through the door, and then went and sat down in a corner, with her face buried in her hands.

The gaoler conducted Ernestine back to his room, and then turned round and looked at her.

‘*You* was never made for a detective officer,’ he said.

‘I don’t suppose I was,’ said Ernestine, laughing. ‘I saw how foolish I had been the moment I asked that question.’

‘It was a green thing to go and do,’ said the gaoler pensively.

‘But did you hear what that girl said to me as we came out?’ exclaimed Ernestine. ‘She said Rosie Brown was at Mother Dorrell’s in Priory Lane. It is such an odd address that I remember it well.’

‘Yes, yes, and it was right enough, no doubt. It was Nell Lewis told you that, and there’s a deal of good in that gal. I know all about her from the first, and a bigger rascal than the young fellow that ruined her does not live, for all he is a lord with a fine estate at his back.’

‘Then if you know where this place is, had I not better go at once?’ said Ernestine eagerly.

The gaoler sat down deliberately, put his hands on his knees, and looked steadily at her.

‘Be you a-going to take my advice,’ he said, ‘or be you a-going to take your own way?’

‘Oh, I shall certainly take your advice,’ said Ernestine. ‘You must know much better than I can do what is best. I only want so much to find this poor girl.’

‘And you shall find her if you are guided by me, for I’ll help you. I’ll help you for two reasons : first and foremost, because I like to help those that are trying to do good. Though I’ve lived among a blessed lot of blackguards all my days, I still believe it’s possible to do them good when folks goes at it with a will as you do. They’ve got the Lord on their side, and the devil’s no match for them ; and, secondly, I’ll do what I can for you, because you are a real lady every inch of you ; and I can tell you, I know a lady when I see her, from a make-believe, dressed up in silks and satins.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Ernestine; ‘I am sure we shall succeed, if you are kind enough to help me.’

‘We shall succeed; but first, I’ll tell you what would happen if you went yourself to Mother Dorrell’s. You would knock at the door, and some one would take a look at you through a hole in the shutter of a closed window. You’d be kept waiting a bit; then the door would open, and you would see a most respectable-looking widow, who would say she was sorry to keep you waiting, but she had been lying down, her nerves was so bad ever since her poor dear husband died. Then you would ask for Rosie Brown, and she would say she never heard of no such person; and you would say, Wasn’t she one of the gals lodging there? Then she’d hold up her hands, and say, Gals lodging there! what ever did you mean? And you’d say, Wasn’t she Mrs. Dorrell? Yes, sure, she was Mrs. Dorrell, a lone widow, getting an honest livelihood; and who ever had dared to say she took in gals to lodge there? O the wickedness of this world! They wouldn’t have ventured to say such a thing if her poor dear husband had been alive to purtect her. And she’d ask you to inspeck the premises, and see if she had any room for lodgers there; and you’d see a tidy parlour, with a Bible on the table, and a picture of the Bishop on the wall, and a little kitchen, and nothing

more; and you'd pass a little door to the back as you went out again, and take no notice of it. But if you could have opened it, which you couldn't, for the old hypocrite would have the key in her pocket, you'd have seen a court with twenty or thirty rooms round it, and two or three gals in each of them; and there's nothing much more like hell upon earth than that is, so far as sin and wickedness is concerned.'

Ernestine shuddered. 'I could indeed do no good there, but how then shall I ever see this girl?'

'Well, I shall just speak a word to the university marshal, and tell him all about it; and I'll ask him to get the proctor to go past the place for a night or two with his bull-dogs.'

'Bull-dogs!' interrupted Ernestine, astonished.

That's half a dozen of the university police that follow the proctor on his rounds. I'll get them to walk near Mrs. Dorrell's when the gals are coming out, and I'll let them see this picture. Then they'll keep Rosie in sight till they see some gownsman speak to her, and they'll have her took up in a trice, and soon get her sent off to gaol. So you go home, ma'am, and take it easy. Leave it all to me, and in two or three days' time at furthest, I'll send and tell you to come and see her here.'

‘That will indeed be helping me,’ said Ernestine; ‘I am very much obliged to you. I will go and wait quietly as you say; I shall be so thankful to find her at last.’ Her cheek glowed, and her eyes brightened at the thought; and the gaoler, looking at her with evident approval, as she rose to go, held out a huge hand, with which he solemnly shook hers, looking as if he were celebrating a compact of eternal friendship; and this ceremony over, the turnkey appeared with his keys, and conducted her to the gate, whence she hurried home to the unsuspecting Mrs. Thompson, who little thought from what species of society her charge had come.

CHAPTER II.

REGINALD'S HISTORY.

REGINALD was worse next day. All night the nurse said his cough had racked him, and the morning found him exhausted and yet feverish, and so he continued through the whole day. Dr. Compton stood musingly by the window of the sitting-room, after he had left him in the evening; and at last turning round, he met Ernestine's anxious eyes.

'Of course,' he said, 'you understand that I can say nothing comforting of your brother's state. I was only thinking just now what a wonderful tenacity of life he displays.'

'I daresay you will think me fanciful,' said Ernestine, 'but it really seems to me as if he could not die, so long as this terrible disquiet and unrest is upon him. His horror of death, whatever may be its cause, appears to chain his very soul back to earth, and his whole will is centred in the struggle to cling to life with all his strength.'

'No, I do not think you fanciful,' said Dr. Compton,

in the slow, thoughtful manner habitual to him. 'The termination of life is of course the result of physical causes; but there is no doubt that the bright, willing acceptance of death I have seen in some cases, does smooth the dark passage to the grave most wonderfully; persons certainly die more easily, and it may be, at the last, more swiftly, when they have fully resigned their place in this world, and turned their thoughts and hopes to the unseen future. I wish your brother would do so; but—' he said no more, and again stood thoughtfully looking out.

Presently there came a light knock at the door, and the visitor, without waiting for an answer, opened it and walked in. He was a man apparently of middle age, although his hair, which was cut close on his small head, was quite grey. He had a clever face, but with a gentle, quiet expression; and his voice when he spoke was peculiarly low and pleasant. He wore the gown of an M.A., and came in, cap in hand, when he perceived Ernestine in the room. Dr. Compton turned round—

'Ah, Vincent, is it you? I am glad you are better. I heard you were laid up in town.'

'Yes, I have been ill for six weeks.'

'Miss Courtenay,' said Dr. Compton, 'perhaps you have not met with Mr. Vincent before. Let me intro-

duce him,—one of our college tutors, with whom I believe your brother is a special favourite.

Ernestine remembered the name as that of a man for whom Reginald had a great affection and admiration, and whose lectures he had attended assiduously.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘there are few young men for whom I have felt a greater interest than for Courtenay. I am deeply grieved to hear of his illness. I had no idea it was serious when I left Greyburgh. What do you think of him, Compton?’

‘I may tell you the truth,’ said the doctor, ‘for I have not deceived Miss Courtenay. He cannot recover; there is extensive disease of the lungs, and the progress of the complaint is rapid.’

‘I am shocked to hear it,’ said Vincent, who looked sincerely distressed. ‘I hope I may see him. It will not hurt him, will it?’

‘Certainly not; I should think it would do him good to see you,’ said Compton. ‘At least, anything that gives him pleasure is good for him.’

Vincent smiled, as if there could be no doubt of Reginald’s pleasure in seeing him; and as the doctor now took his leave, Ernestine asked him to sit down while she went to tell her brother of his arrival. As she opened the door of the bedroom, she saw Reginald

leaning forward with a look of intense anxiety on his face. He beckoned to her hastily to shut the door and come near to him. Then he seized both her hands with convulsive energy, and said in a hoarse whisper—

‘Is it Vincent who is there? Is it Vincent?’

‘Yes,’ said Ernestine; ‘he wishes to see you; he seems so kind, and so distressed at your illness.’

A moment before, she could not have thought it possible for Reginald’s face to become paler than it was; but now every shade of colour receded even from his lips, and left him ghastly.

‘Ernestine, if ever you have loved me, help me now. Don’t let Vincent come near me. To see him would be to recall every moment of agony I have suffered in these last dreadful weeks, and make me live them over again all in one. It is more than I can bear. It would rouse up all the demons of thought with which I have struggled so long. I hoped he would not have returned till my little time of life was past. Don’t let me be tortured more than I can bear. Ernie, save me—save me!’

‘My dearest,’ said Ernestine soothingly, ‘you shall not see him unless you like. I will go and tell him so. Don’t tremble, Reggie; no one shall come near you.’

‘The thought of the agony it would be to see him is enough to make me tremble ; but don’t let him think I have lost my affection for him, or that I am ungrateful for his past kindness. Say what you like ; only save me from seeing him.’

Ernestine went slowly back. She hardly knew how to word the refusal, for she was aware that Reginald had been constantly with Vincent, and had greatly enjoyed his society. Ernestine was, however, of too truthful a nature to have learnt the habit of equivocation in her former fashionable life ; so, when she met Mr. Vincent’s inquiring look, she lifted her candid eyes to his face, and said—

‘I am very sorry that my brother does not feel able to see you. I do not know why. He begs you will not think him ungrateful for your former kindness, or that he has lost his attachment to you ; but he is unequal to seeing you.’

Vincent bent his keen eyes inquiringly on Ernestine.

‘This is very strange,’ he said, in his low soft voice, ‘and, I may say, very painful to me, for Courtenay and I have been great friends. I felt for him as I might have done for a son or a younger brother of my own, and I should have thought that in this his hour of trial it would have been a comfort to him to see me. Is it,

perhaps, that he is acting in accordance with advice from others ?'

Ernestine looked up astonished. 'There is no one to advise him but Dr. Compton and myself, and we should both have been glad if he could have seen you, and found pleasure in doing so ; but the truth is, there is so much in my brother's state of mind which is wholly inexplicable, that he seems to me, mentally, like a man covered with secret wounds, who shrinks from the slightest touch. I am sure you will understand, however, that I must do all I can to avoid his being agitated in his present weak state.'

• 'Surely ; and I should be the last to wish to cause him any disturbance, if, indeed, to see me could agitate him. I can hardly think it, and I must hope this is only a passing fancy. Perhaps he is afraid that the sight of me might recall happier times ; at all events, I will call to-morrow, and I trust he may be then able to receive me.'

'I hope he may,' said Ernestine. 'I will tell him how kindly you speak of him,' and as Vincent took his leave, she opened the door, and went softly into Reginald's room. She stopped a moment, in surprise at his position. Through the shadows of the twilight she could see him, leaning forward, gathered almost into a

heap, his hands clasped convulsively on the arm of the chair, and his face bent down upon them, while deep gasping sobs shook his whole frame. Ernestine flew to his side. 'Reggie, dearest, what is the matter?' She knelt down, and tenderly lifted up his head. He turned towards her his ghastly face, tearless, but convulsed with the hysterical sobs, which he could not control, and stretched out his hands to her.

'Oh, Ernie, that I had never seen him! O that I could go back to the days before I knew him, when all was bright and clear in the eternal future! What if it were a dream,—it still was life! it was hope; it was rest and peace; oh, Ernie, it was heaven!' He fell back exhausted. Ernestine sat down quietly beside him, passed her arm under his head, so that he could lean against her, in which position he always rested more easily, and said to him, very gently—

'My darling, you made me promise not to ask you any questions, and I have not done so; but I cannot be blind to the fact that the mental agony you have been enduring lately is caused by a loss of hope in the future beyond the grave. I do not know what has produced it, or in what form it has come upon you, but I am sure that nothing else could make the prospect of death so terrible to you. I do wish now, Reginald, that

you would unburden your heart to me, and give me back the confidence which never failed between us before. I think it would be a relief to you, and it could not make me sadder than I am to see you so far from peace and hope.' He gave a heavy sigh.

'Yes, if I have failed to deceive you, I may as well let you know all. It can make little difference now to you, or to myself; and you, Ernestine, who have been my life's friend, have a right to my confidence. It will be a relief to me to trace back the slow, mysterious steps of the evil that has overwhelmed me at last. But is there no one within hearing? Shall we be quite undisturbed?'

'Quite. Nurse Berry has gone home for the night, and it is too late now for visitors either to you or me.'

'Draw down the blind then. I do not want to see that starlit sky; it has been one of the tests of my wretchedness that I can no longer look on it without despair.' He paused a moment, and then resting his head on Ernestine's shoulder, began in a low quiet voice to tell her all she so longed to know.

'I first knew that I was dying, Ernie, about a year ago. I had had a cough and pain in the chest for some time previously, but one day I felt a choking sensation, and when I put my handkerchief to my lips it

was stained with blood. I thought I knew what that meant, but I determined to ascertain the truth, without hinting at my illness to any one here. I went to London, and saw Sir ——, the great consumption doctor. I did not tell him who I was, or anything about myself, but I told him I had come to him for an honest opinion. I wished to know if my lungs were fatally affected, and if so, how long I had to live. He was very frank indeed with me. He said the disease had already reached a stage when human aid and skill could no longer check it, and that, indeed, mine was a case which had probably been hopeless from the first. He said that in a warm climate—Madeira, or some such place—I might live two years or so ; in England, scarce half that time. My mind was soon made up to be content with the shorter term. A last year of life, in suffering and weakness, would have been dearly purchased by the loss of my friends among the thinking men of Greyburgh, and the opportunities I had here of testing and deepening my knowledge of the only subject that could be of any importance to me from that hour for evermore. I came back with the determination to devote the brief remainder of my life entirely to the study of divinity.'

'And you never let me know you were so ill,' said Ernestine sorrowfully.

‘I know it seems as if I had been unkind, Ernie, but I did not mean it so. I loved you truly all the time ; don’t blame me now. I knew no care, no tenderness, could prolong my life one hour, and I did not wish my last precious days to be wasted upon fruitless efforts, moving from place to place, consulting doctors, and all the rest of the useless medical machinery which is such a mockery in a case like mine. The great event that was before me occupied my whole heart and soul,—I had so much to do!’ He paused a moment, as if a flood of recollections were coming over him, and then went on : ‘At that time, Ernie, the thought of death was sweet to me beyond what words can at all express. You know that my delicate health had precluded me from entering with much zest into the pleasures of either childhood or youth, and, in fact, I never knew what it was to have any love for this life. From the first moment when I could reason on the uses of existence it failed to satisfy me. I saw in every one of its varied phases its utter incompleteness. Men seemed to me to spend the whole of their allotted time on earth in acquiring, in some shape or other, that which was to perish with them—learning, fame, riches, happiness : which of these things could pass the portal of the tomb? “There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge in the grave, whither thou

goest." These words seemed to me the bitter commentary written on all the occupations and desires of men; and if there was little in life that I could love, there was much that I could hate and shrink from. Like others who have been destined to an early death, many things were pain and grief to me which caused no pang to sterner and stronger natures. The sight of oppression and cruelty, even when practised only on poor helpless animals, has made me long to die many a time. Falsehood and injustice, with all the suffering they caused to others, wore my very soul with fruitless indignation; low degrading vices, and the coarse sensuality which brutalizes human nature, literally sickened me, and I turned with loathing from the many forms of evil and wretchedness in this world, to long with unspeakable desire for the hour when the Vision of Peace should dawn upon my eyes, the heavenly new Jerusalem in which I believed, even as I believed in Him who was its light, and joy, and glory; for, Ernestine,' and his voice became trembling and broken as he spoke, 'this was the master principle of my whole being at that time, the source of every thought and feeling, every hope and wish, the centre round which all my aspirations revolved. I believed in the marvellous revelation of a Love, unearthly, sure, eternal, which is involved in the

doctrine of the Incarnation ; and that love,--the love of the Incarnate God, seemed to draw me to Himself with an ineffable sweetness and fascination. In it I found the full satisfaction of my whole immortal being. Yes, every faculty, every affection of heart, and soul, and mind, could find expression and rest in a love which combined the perfect sympathy of a heart, human and yet pure, with the perfect protection and wisdom of a God. To know then, that a few months only separated me from the free and full enjoyment of this the only really Good, was simply rapture to me. The thought of the probable previous suffering, of the pang of soul and body parting, were as nothing in comparison with the inexpressible blessedness of passing into the immediate presence of Him, who had loved me even unto the death, and would love me still, for ever and for ever. Had I died in the day I first heard my malady was fatal, I had gone to the grave with rapturous joy ; and the change that has passed upon me, the change which makes me now, with unspeakable horror, shrink from the death which I believe to be annihilation, or a worse form of life, because unpurified and hopeless, is the work of the man whom I have just refused to see. You must not mistake me ; he did not injure me wilfully. It was with no deliberate intention that he brought this curse of un-

belief and darkness upon me. Far from it. His desire was to serve me; but it was the inevitable result of his teaching, on a speculative mind like mine, the irresistible deduction from the principles he laid down as the foundation of all religious argument.

‘Some time before I knew that my malady was hopeless, I had attended his lectures; and he had enforced upon me strongly what he considered the duty, as well as the privilege, of “free inquiry” as to matters of faith. He said it was unworthy of the reason with which God had endowed us, that we should rest, in what he called the hereditary belief we derived from parents or instructors, and quietly accept the teaching of others, without testing its truth for ourselves. Ah! Ernestine, how well I can see the miserable sophistry of such words now! But I did not then. I had not, however, up to that time, followed his leading in this respect. The love of Christ in the atonement was a reality to me; it was in truth all in all!—but when I saw death staring me in the face, when I saw that the time given me to make sure of eternal life was drawing with fearful rapidity to a close, then many words, many casual expressions uttered by Vincent, awoke in me an uncertainty as to whether my faith were right, and not a mere traditionary creed, whose foundations I had in no

way tested, while the very fact that this faith was now so terribly precious to me, as the one hope of the eternity already opening at my feet, made me tremble lest I were in any measure resting in delusions. I felt that I must make sure of the ground on which I was to take my first step beyond the grave ; and, in my arrogance, I thought that Vincent was right when he called it a duty to inquire, without fear of sacrilege or presumption, into the deepest mysteries of God, and to demand proofs of them which should be agreeable to human reason. It seemed to me that there could not be a more fitting occupation for my last few months of earthly existence ; and I never for a moment doubted that the result would only be to give me firmer confidence, and more entire security, at least in the greater principles of that religion which was my life. And so, indeed, it might have been, but that, for my unutterable loss and misery, I determined to place myself under Vincent's teaching for this inquiry. I believed I could not have a more able guide, and he had always been kind to me ; ever ready to help me in any intellectual difficulties. He gladly met my wishes then ; and for the remainder of the term, I spent the most of my time at his rooms ; while for the long vacation I joined a reading-party which went with him to Wales. I resumed the

same practices for a few weeks after our return here ; but by the time the early winter came I needed his help no more, and the sight of him was very agony to me ; for his work was done ; the blackness of darkness had fallen over my soul, and my whole being was given up to that awful desolation, which those alone can realize for whom God is yet unrevealed ; and existing creeds, the baseless fabrics of a dream.'

Reginald paused, his white lips quivering, and the cold dew standing on his forehead. Ernestine gave him some wine, and kissed many times the thin, waxen hand she held, but she did not speak, and in a few moments he went on :—

'What Vincent's belief was and is, I cannot tell. He is a good man ; nominally he holds the religion of Christ, and in that Name ministers to others, and specially to the poor, by whom he is much beloved. Never in so many words, at least in my hearing, has he denied the great truths on which that religion hangs but he cast more than doubt on the means whereby they are revealed to us ; and, by denying certain facts, he left it an open question whether others were true,—by overthrowing the authority of one portion of an indivisible system, he cut away the foundations of the whole. The essence of his own belief seemed to be in a progress

of the human race, analogous to that which takes place in the individual man from infancy to age; and, though he never said so openly, yet I could see, and others saw it as well, that he held what he called the traditionary belief, to be but the undeveloped conclusions of the world in its infancy, which could no longer suffice to its growing maturity. Of course, the deduction was obvious, that if, at the point to which he had arrived, so much was to be cut off, it would, in a generation or two, be deemed wise to give up the whole. Ernestine, you know it was a peculiarity of my mind that I could never rest satisfied with the primary and partial results of any theory or principle newly brought before me. I always felt that I could not truly or reasonably, either accept or reject a new proposition, till I had sounded the depths of every ultimate possibility involved in it. It was thus that I was compelled to act with every position Vincent took in our many conversations on religion, and the inevitable result was that I arrived at conclusions which he neither intended nor taught; and which it would probably have shocked him to know I had reached. He seemed himself to have the power to stop short at a given point in the false and dangerous line of thought he pursued; but he could not check the course of another's mind. He

could not set a man on a steep, downward path, with impetus violent enough to carry him into the abyss at the bottom ; and say, " Thus far shalt thou go, and no further." Gradually, it became plain to me, though he would never have admitted it himself, that the whole course of his teaching, and the ultimate conclusions to be deduced from them, tended to the practical denial of the one glorious doctrine on which the whole of Christianity hinges. The thought was utter agony to me. I fought with it, as with the deadliest foe. I held back from it with a desperate horror of the result ; for his great intellect had overborne my weaker powers. Mentally, I was his slave ; and, Ernie, my wretched, helpless struggle was in vain. On, on swept the darkness that was to steep my soul in everlasting night ; and the hour came when at last it overwhelmed me, and I could no longer pretend to myself that I believed. I remember that hour ! and, if there be an eternity, I shall remember it with anguish in every instant of the illimitable ages.

' I had been reading with Vincent, and in his low quiet voice he had been commenting on certain passages of Scripture, in a manner to give a dark confirmation to the worst conclusions, which his whole course of teaching could possibly lead to. He had

done this in answer to an objection I had raised to some of his arguments,—an objection on which depended the last hold I yet had on the faith in which all my hopes had been centred ; and he had overthrown this my final chance with the same calm unconsciousness, which from first to last had seemed to characterize his gradual destruction of my belief. I knew that he had done it ; and I knew that the worst was come. I could no longer deceive myself. The time had indeed arrived when I must face the truth, and understand what my position really was. I muttered something about feeling ill, and without waiting to hear Vincent's gentle regrets, I rushed from his room, never to enter it again. My brain seemed on fire, while my heart lay like lead in my breast, and I was only conscious of one feeling,—the wish to be alone where none could interrupt me. I dashed away through the streets, crowded with men coming back from their afternoon walk, laughing and talking in careless mirth. I never stopped till I reached the farthest point of the meadow,—your favourite walk, Ernestine, but which in that cold winter evening was completely deserted, and as dreary a spot as could well be found. I flung myself down on the seat under the old oak, whose skeleton branches could not shut out the grey lowering sky. At my feet the

dark river went its way, silent and cheerless. All around me the dead leaves lay soaking into the earth, wet with recent rains; the wind moaned and sighed like a spirit in pain, and the bare leafless trees tossed wildly to and fro as it passed shuddering through them. It seemed the uttermost desolation of nature; but oh, Ernestine, what was it to the desolation of the soul which had lost Christ and His love for ever! He gasped for a moment, and then went on: 'As I sat there, feeling at first stupified and incapable of thought, the last gleam of red light which the dying day had left like a streak of blood on the horizon, disappeared suddenly in the heavy bank of cloud that rose up to meet the descending shadows, and night fell black and hopeless, as it had already fallen on my living spirit. Then I roused myself, and gathered up such energy of thought as yet remained to me to look my destiny in the face, as it was now and ever must be. Night without morning; death without resurrection; eternity without God: this was what I saw as my only future—for the intervening space of mortal existence was I knew passing from me swift as the flight of the night-bird that just then rose with a plaintive cry over my head and vanished into the darkness. Death! I could imagine the sobbing breath growing faint and ever fainter till

it ceased—the familiar faces fading into the dimness shadowing the closing eyes—the heart growing slowly cold and still—the last choking pang of parting life ; and then the motionless clay stretched out before the loving eyes of watchers ; but when I went further, and tried to realize the annihilation which I believed would follow, I could not. Did you ever try, Ernie, to compass in actual mental reality the thought of a total cessation of being for yourself, the complete loss of identity, the extinction of consciousness ? You will find you cannot do it ; at least I could not. Still the ever-living Ego in myself rose rampant, and refused to recognise or believe in any real sense the possibility of its future non-existence. It seemed to me that the deathlessness of that vital consciousness within, was an indestructible conviction born with life, an innate idea which no strength of argument could kill. Reason assured me that annihilation must be my doom, that I had no more right to expect an immortality than the crushed insect at my feet, but the living principle within me rose up in mockery at the thought ; it could not, would not perish ! When I found this I turned to look at the alternative, and the very blood seemed to freeze in my veins, as I saw how far more horrible it was than even an extinction of being would have been. Ernestine,' and he !

grasped her wrist with his thin fingers, 'think of the soul cast out from the body which housed and sheltered it, and placed it in communication with human affections and capacities, with the sources at least of comfort and rest,—think of it, flung, a helpless breath of indestructible life, an isolated principle of being, of identity, of consciousness, upon the desolate wilderness of illimitable space, like a feather tossed upon the boundless ocean, like a mote wandering on the boundless air,—no God, no Christ, no stay, no rest—no refuge, where it might hope to flee in the most distant immensity—no help, no protection, no love—no possible aim, no imaginable hope—alone, and alone for ever, in the most awful of conceivable solitudes, the desert of infinity! This is the doom I had learnt to expect beyond the grave, and, Ernestine, can you wonder that from the indescribable horror to which I am hastening, I shrink with an agony of dread, abhorrence, and repulsion, to which no human words can give expression? Doubtless it is a pitiable sight to see a dying wretch like me clinging to his diseased decaying life, with an abject terror of its loss. What a coward I must seem, shuddering through my worn frame at the thought of the dissolution which is the universal law of all mankind,—the death which feeble women and tender children have

met with smiles of joy! But oh, Ernestine, the blackness and coldness of that eternal solitude beyond, who could endure it one instant, even in thought?—a spark of life alone in the abyss of infinite space!’

‘This is too much for you, Reginald,’ said Ernestine tenderly, as he remained silent for a moment, under the influence of a strong fit of shivering. ‘Say no more now, you can tell me the rest to-morrow.’

He did not answer or seem to hear her. His dark eyes, wild and dilated, were fixed on vacancy, then gradually a softer light stole into them, shining through the dew of unshed tears, and he spoke again, not in the hoarse, excited voice with which he had up to this time given out his rapid utterance, but in a low dreamy tone, which fell softly on the ear:—

‘I remember, as I lay upon the ground, crushed under the weight of this awful anticipation, from which I knew I could never escape till the reality swallowed me up, there rose upon my soul a vision of what death would have been if the love of Christ had still been truth to me. I saw myself passing from a life where all was incomplete, where human joys and loves proved to be but the mocking shadows of the divine reality; where an ever unsatisfied longing, an ever enduring restlessness, consumed the living soul, whose eternal rest and

satisfaction could be in ONE alone; and through the grave and gate of death I seemed to float into the serene deep, the pure ecstatic calm of that Love, revealed in living Presence. As a bird flying back to its nest through storms and gloom, I seemed to dart towards that Fount and Centre of all peace and consolation, till, clinging with adoring thankfulness to the holy pierced Feet, I looked up into the Eyes once closed for me in mortal death, and met the infinite tenderness, the unfathomable love of their pitying gaze, and learned in that one look to know that He was the aim and object of my being, the desire of my immortality, the full contentment of every aspiration, the very consummation and perfection of all bliss. Oh, fairest, purest dream! Oh, heavenly light of boundless hope! Oh, blessed vision of rapturous peace! If but one instant it might visit me again, with its sweet soothing promise; if but once more I might imagine I could meet the compassionate eyes of the one True Love, stronger than death and deep as eternity! But in vain, in vain—never, never more—lost, all lost! Ernestine, I am faint; is this death?’ and the broken words died on his lips, as he sank into a deep swoon. In great alarm Ernestine raised his head, and used strong restoratives, till the feeble pulse slowly beat again, and a tinge of colour

dyed the white lips. As consciousness returned, he drew her face close to his, and whispered faintly : ' One more word I must say that you may know the worst, Ernie.' With a great effort he seemed to gather up all his strength to speak, and went on : ' The idea of living out my life with that awful prospect beyond it was too intolerable. I determined to lose all thought of the future in that which men call pleasure, but which the God in whom I once believed calls sin. What did it matter if I stained myself with deadly vice, if there were no loving Father, no compassionate Saviour, no sanctifying Spirit, to call for honour and purity from my deathless soul ? If there were no God, then was there no law, no righteousness, no distinction between good and evil. To make the most of life, such as it is, by sensual indulgence, is the religion of men who have no faith, and into this I plunged—loathing it, loathing myself, and ruining the souls of others with my own, till death came near enough to grasp me by the hand and drag me out of it, with but this certainty for fruit of sin, detested in its very commission, that if the religion in which I formerly believed was true, then had I, by my wanton defilement, cut myself off for ever from the Holy God.' As he spoke his form seemed to collapse, and his head sank on his breast, till he lay huddled into a heap in his

chair. The nurse had been for some time in the next room, and Ernestine called her anxiously to come to him. She shook her head when she saw Reginald.

‘Miss Courtenay,’ she said, ‘we must lay him in his bed now. He is too weak to refuse, and he cannot support himself any more in his chair, I am sure.’ Ernestine agreed, and together they lifted the light burden and laid him down on the bed from which he was never to rise again. Then the nurse gave him a strong stimulant, which roused him from his stupor, and the mournful dark eyes opened slowly, and fixed themselves on Ernestine, with a look which seemed to bring tears from her very heart. She knelt down beside him, and whispered—

‘My darling, the love you have so longed for is not and never can be lost. It is with you, it is round you still. You cannot see it, as a blind man cannot see the sun, but it is surely there, for the love of Christ is the charity that never faileth.’

He could not speak, but his eyes remained fixed on her with a piteous hungering look, till they gradually closed in utter weariness, and he slept the sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER III.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

ERNESTINE had been in a measure prepared for the revelation made to her by her unhappy brother; nor did his complete subservience to the master-mind of another surprise her, for his reasoning powers had never been strong, and his susceptible temperament and ardent imagination laid him peculiarly open to any intellectual influence which might be brought to bear on him. But she remained in sore perplexity and distress about him during the long sleepless hours of that sad night. Was she to let him die in this utter darkness and despair? Yet what could she do: he would certainly refuse to see any one more able than herself to help him, and how was she to reach this wandering soul, from which the very light of life had been stolen? When she returned from the hotel, where she had vainly tried to obtain a few hours' rest, it was plain that a great change for the worse had taken place in Reginald since the night before. He lay now perfectly still,

because too weak to move, saying nothing, but showing, by the restless eyes, which spoke volumes to his sister whenever she came near him, that the poor wearied spirit within was still keenly alive to its unabated torture. The doctor came early, and Ernestine saw by his manner that he believed Reginald to have gone down many steps into the valley of the shadow of death since he had seen him last ; but he could do nothing beyond insisting on perfect quiet, and administering the usual composing-draught, which kept him half dozing through the first part of the day.

Ernestine had gone into the sitting-room to write a few lines to Lingard, when the door opened softly, and Vincent appeared. The hot blood rushed to her face with the sudden fiery indignation, most unusual to her gentle temperament, which the sight of him produced. She rose up, and remained standing,—unable, with all her habitual courtesy, to ask him to sit down in that room, while, with a quick glance, she satisfied herself that Reginald's door was close shut, so that no sound of the too familiar voice could meet his ear. Vincent came forward, and asked with tender anxiety how Courtenay was.

‘He is dying,’ answered Ernestine, with involuntary abruptness.

Vincent looked keenly at her. 'You shock me, Miss Courtenay; this is sad news: is he worse than he was yesterday?'

'Much, much worse.'

'Then I trust I shall have the comfort of seeing him to-day, as I fear from what you say it might be too late another time.'

'It is quite impossible,' exclaimed Ernestine.

'Does Compton forbid it?'

'I have not asked him.'

'You are acting, then, on your own responsibility in refusing me admission?'

'Yes, and I know that I am right,' she answered sadly.

'Miss Courtenay, may I ask you to consider that, notwithstanding the difference of age, I have been your brother's most intimate friend here; and I have some right to demand the opportunity of bidding him a last farewell.'

Ernestine turned impetuously towards him: 'You can call yourself his friend!' she exclaimed, 'when to you he owes it that he is dying the most miserable death it is possible for a mortal man to suffer!' The passionate tears burst from her eyes as she spoke, and, flinging herself down in a chair, she hid her face in her

hands. Vincent stood before her quite silent for a moment, and then, in a cold calm voice, he said—

‘This is a very grave charge, Miss Courtenay. I think you will admit that you are bound to substantiate it; to me it is quite inexplicable.’

Making a great effort to regain composure, she lifted her head and looked at him.

‘My brother came to you in the ordinary course of his studies, full of the deepest peace, and the brightest hope in the Faith, which he had never doubted one hour. You told him that he was trusting to false securities, when he listened to the voice of God speaking to him through the channels of His own Divine appointment. You told him that a “free inquiry” was his duty; that he must seek the truth for himself, with no other guide but his reason; that he must demand to be initiated into the counsels of the Most High, and refuse to believe what he could not understand. His mind is not strong, his reasoning powers are not great: he followed your advice, under your own guidance, and the result has been that all faith, all light, have been obscured for him by the blackness of an utter infidelity, which is surrounding his deathbed now with the horrors of the most complete despair it is possible to imagine.’

Vincent was resting his head on his hand as he leant on the mantel-shelf. He looked down at Ernestine as she spoke, and when her eyes met his, the natural gentleness of her nature reasserted itself within her. 'Mr. Vincent,' she said, 'I feel that I have no right thus to seem to call you to account, though it is hard to watch such a death in silence; but when Reginald told me last night that there were many others on whom your influence had worked as fatally as on himself, I felt the longing wish that you could know the effect of your teaching as I know it now, who have witnessed my brother's agony. It would be some consolation even for his bitter misery and ruin,' she continued, her voice choked with emotion, 'if his cruel sufferings might save others from the risk of such a doom. I think it would, if you could see—'

She stopped, unable to proceed; and after a moment of painful silence Vincent said: 'Did your brother tell you that *I* had taught him infidelity?'

'Not in so many words, but you threw discredit on the sources whence his faith was derived. You cut away the old foundations from beneath his feet, and opened the way to dangerous speculations; you led him to a given point in theories whose ultimate conclusions could be none other than a denial of the truths he held;

and however little you may have intended such a result as has arisen, you first enforced this free inquiry upon him, which has been his ruin.'

'But,' said Vincent, 'unless men are to accept with a blind senseless submission the creed which comes to them by inheritance, without ever investigating its truth for themselves, what other guide can they have but the reason their Creator has given them?'

'They have the Word of God, the witness of the Church, and the voice of Him who redeemed them, speaking to their souls, if they will but hear Him.'

'These are the very points on which we require proof; and how are they to be tested but by reason?'

'The Redeemer of the world gave a very different test,' said Ernestine, lifting her clear eyes to his face. HE said we were to learn the truth by personal holiness: "Whosoever will do the will of my Father which is in heaven, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God." He has once for all proclaimed Himself to be the Light of the world, and called on men to prove His truth by following Him, for in so doing they should not walk in darkness, but have the Light of life; and this is but the echo of more ancient teaching, when, long before Christ came, His Father had announced to men of old: "If with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever

surely find Me." But, Mr. Vincent,' said Ernestine, checking the words which seemed to burst almost involuntarily from her lips, 'I feel that it is not for me to talk on such subjects with you: it is not a woman's province; and I have no wish to step beyond that, even if I were competent to argue with you. But one thing only I think I have a right to say, after witnessing the anguish of such a deathbed as my brother's. Whatever your own opinions may be, you have of course undoubted liberty to hold them free from questioning by any human being, but why,—why will you tamper with the faith of others? This is what I cannot understand in you, and teachers like you. Why risk a calamity so terrible as the loss of faith to any living soul, knowing, as you do, how subtle, how delicate is the hold we have on truth in this imperfect life, and how dreadful is the agony of doubt, the utter void and darkness of unbelief? Is it not enough that men have sin and temptation, and a thousand perils, to beset them on the path of eternal life? Why loosen their grasp on the only support on which they can lean with hope of safety? Why seek to make others share opinions of whose truth you can never be certain on this side of the grave, when in so doing you must disturb the calm which they believe has come to them from God? What

if you imagine this to be delusion, death alone can prove if you are right or wrong,—too late for reparation to undying souls. Mr. Vincent, have you never thought what it is you are doing if the ancient faith you are undermining in these souls be indeed the very truth of God? Is it not their very life, their eternal life, which you are taking from them? Oh, surely it were better and safer to hide for ever in your own mind the doubts and speculations which may work such fearful ruin. Your own life is given you as a prey, but the souls of others are in the hand of God. Oh, why not leave them safe with Him!’ She was almost sobbing before she ceased, and Vincent looked at her with an expression of deep pain.

‘Miss Courtenay, believe me I would rather die than consciously injure the souls of others. But is there not a duty to the truth itself? Are we not bound by this free inquiry, against which you protest so warmly, to secure that truth from being falsified, or misrepresented, or overlaid with human traditions?’


‘Cannot God defend His own truth, the true faith once given to the world? And is it likely that all the endless varieties of human intellect and reason, swayed by the impulses and motives of individual temperament, could meet in acknowledgment of the only truth? Mr.

Vincent, I pretend to no logical power of argument, or to learning a hundredth part as great as yours, but this I know, your teaching has wrecked the soul of him who lies there dying in despair; and I cannot believe that the utmost good you could ever have hoped from the avowal of your opinions, could weigh for a moment in comparison with the inestimable value of one deathless soul.'

He listened, his eyes fixed on her face, and, without waiting for an answer, she held out her hand and said, 'I must go to Reginald now; forgive me if I have spoken too freely.'

He held her hand tightly for a moment, and then spoke in a low voice, 'If indeed I have caused your brother the pain you speak of, it is I who need forgiveness; and in any case I deeply grieve for his distress and yours; but I find it hard to believe my teaching has caused a result so different to my wishes.' He seemed as if he would have said more, but, checking himself, he loosened his hold, and turned slowly away.

Ernestine went at once to her brother. He was lying quite still upon his bed, but there was an unusual brightness on his face, and all physical pain seemed to have ceased. The nurse had seen too many deathbeds not to know what these indications meant; but seeing



no alarm in Ernestine's expression, she did not like to speak too freely.

'He is a little revived, ma'am,' she said, 'and has been asking for you very often. He can speak without coughing now, but I don't quite like his look,' she added in a whisper, as she passed out of the room.

To Ernestine it seemed, however, as if, for the time at least, he were better. His voice was stronger, and his mind evidently quite clear. As she came and sat down beside his bed, he drew her close to him, and asked, with a look of intense eagerness, 'Ernestine, on what ground did you make that assertion last night? What is the evidence on which you found your strong faith in Christ and His love?'

'The evidence of my own soul,' she answered. 'I *know Him* in the inmost depths of my spirit, not as a mere object of faith, but as a living Person, whose presence I can recognise to be a vivid reality, as clearly as if I saw Him with my bodily eyes. It is a faith not only in the historical Christ of eighteen centuries back, but in the Being, truly existent now, so surely as I live myself, who this day hears me when I speak to Him, who this day is conscious of every thought and feeling of my heart.'

'Internal evidence!' said Reginald; 'that is not a

ground on which logicians or scientific men would consider that any principle of faith could be established.'

'That may be; but there are some truths known as realities to the soul, which neither science nor logic may be able to discover. Reginald, I find it difficult to explain my convictions in words, but I will try. My trust, my whole confidence, is given irresistibly to the actual personal Christ, who is known and admitted by all to have existed once upon this earth. It is not the outward manifestations of His divinity which chiefly satisfy me, but the perfection, the unearthly loveliness of His character and life, which are unquestionable facts. My belief is in the Being, whom historical truth makes known to us in the incomprehensible greatness of His love, His justice, His purity, His utter abnegation of self. Nothing in the whole wide universe would induce me to believe that He, such as He was, could have come into this world to deceive, or even to have let that human race, whom He loved unto the death, deceive themselves concerning Him; nor could I for one moment look back upon the Mount of Calvary, and see Him in His calm, willing suffering, His majesty of forgiveness, His tenderness, His pity, the Omnipotent dispossessing Himself of life, and believe that He was mistaken. My faith is in His own individual truth,

and, therefore, apart from all external evidences, I know that He of a surety is that which He represented Himself to be. For all mysteries, for all difficulties, for all apparent incompleteness even in His manifestation of Himself, I rest upon His own solemn assurance, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter;" and oh, Reginald, there are other words of His, which, because of His incontrovertible holiness and love, might well have power to lay the whole unquiet world to rest,—"*If it were not so, I would have told you.*" If He were not the incarnate God, He would have told us; He would never have let us rest in false hopes of Himself. If He could not have saved us, He would have told us; if His sacrifice upon the cross were not indeed the atonement for the sins of the whole human race, He would have told us. Oh, Reginald, He, such as He was, such as all admit Him to have been, would never have bidden the hungering, thirsting generations of the dying world to come to Him, if He could not indeed have given them life.'

She remained silent, feeling the convulsive grasp of Reginald's hand tightening on hers, and his breathing growing more rapid with emotion as she spoke; but she was unable to divine what thoughts were passing through his mind, and he did not speak. Suddenly a slight

noise at the open door attracted her attention, and, looking up, she saw Thorold standing on the threshold. Reginald perceived him too, and instantly, with a great effort, he raised himself on his pillow, and held out both hands towards him in silence, but with an appealing look which could not be mistaken. Thorold was at his side in a moment, and Ernestine went softly out of the room and closed the door, leaving them together. She felt thoroughly exhausted, and, sitting down, she let her head fall on the table before her, and remained a long time in that position, hardly knowing where she was, as her thoughts wandered far into the world beyond the grave.

At last, when a period much beyond what she imagined had elapsed, and unconscious that her name had been called several times without her hearing it, she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. She started, and turned round to meet Thorold's grave, calm look.

'You must come at once to your brother,' he said, 'but be prepared.'

'For what?' she said, with a sudden gasp.

'For the end, which is come. He is sinking fast.'

She flew into Reginald's room, and flung herself on her knees beside him, but no word or glance told that he knew her. He had reached that awful, mysterious

moment, when the boundaries of mortal sense are past, though life is not yet extinct. The spirit hovered already on the confines of the Unseen, and the eyes, wide open, were fixed upward in that look of fascinated awe and amazement, which those who have once seen it in the eyes of the dying can never forget. The sight checked the cry of love and anguish on Ernestine's lips, as appalled, she saw that, from the midst of his doubt, and darkness, and error, Reginald was passing to the inexorable truths of the changeless eternity. She would fain have called him back, if by any means he might yet have been armed and strengthened for the dread realities opening before him, but she dared not speak.

Thorold's voice, uttering the solemn words of the commendation of souls, alone thrilled through the death-chamber, as the dark, unmistakable shade stole over the wan face, and the breath gasped out at longer and ever longer intervals, ceased at last to stir the white lips with even the faintest motion. Silently, secretly, the mighty mystery was accomplished. The living, sentient soul was gone to know God in His justice and in His love, where no human speculations or error could dim the glory of His everlasting truth; and the wasted form, in which it had sinned and suffered, lay cold and motionless beneath the burning tears of that poor

human love, which is ever so helpless in the face of death.

Yes, he was gone! And whether in that last hour the ineffable pity of the Lord he had denied restored him faith and gave forgiveness, or whether he passed away in his awful darkness, could never be known till the day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, and the dread uncertainty must remain as a shadow on Ernestine's life for evermore. What passed between Thorold and Reginald in that supreme hour she never knew. No word on the subject ever escaped Thorold's lips, and she respected his silence too much to seek from him even the expression of an opinion which might have quieted her painful anxiety. Only once, a few days later, as she and Thorold stood one on each side of the coffin, looking down for the last time on the white still face before it was hid away for ever, her intense anxiety with regard to Reginald found expression in the earnest pleading look of her eyes as she raised them on Thorold. He understood and answered, 'It is not for man to judge. Only remember this, that while the justice of God is immaculate, His mercy is beyond what the human heart can ever in this world conceive. "God is love."'

CHAPTER IV.

ANNIE BROOK.

IT was well for Ernestine Courtenay, at this period, that her unselfish interest in Annie Brook made it impossible for her to dwell too exclusively on her brother's death, and the painful circumstances attending it. When Thorold had appeared so opportunely in Reginald's room, he had come to tell her that Rosie Brown had been arrested the night before, and committed to gaol for a fortnight. He told Ernestine he thought it would be as well that she should not see her for the first few days, that the girl might have time to realize the additional disgrace and wretchedness which her position had acquired by this first imprisonment; and it was not until a day or two after Reginald's funeral that Ernestine, exhausted by her grief, felt able for her visit to the object of her long search. She looked forward to this interview with intense anxiety. What if, having found the lost child, she should fail to win her from the deadly evil that enthralled her? She felt that

she never could endure to let her go again. Yet legally she had no power to detain her, if Annie should refuse to leave her accursed life and her bad companions, and Thorold warned her that she must not be too sanguine.

The old gaoler received her with immense cordiality. He came himself to the second gate to meet her, and, without saying a word, held out his capacious hand, and took hers with an air which implied that their sworn friendship was a fact which he defied the world to disprove. He conducted her to his own room, and begging her with a majestic wave of the arm to be seated, he took his usual place opposite to her.

‘Well, ma’am, we’ve been and caged your bird for you,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Ernestine, ‘I am so very glad, and I should have been here before to see her, only—’ She glanced at her black dress.

‘I know,’ he said; ‘there’s not much goes on in this here town without my knowing of it. I’d like to see the man as would go and get buried in Greyburgh without telling me first,—leastways his friends. Well, ma’am, Rosie Brown’s here, and she’s a bright bit of a thing, that it is a sin and a shame to see driven to such a trade as this. Now, I’ll tell you what I’ve done to help you. The gals that were here when you were so

uncommon green in letting them see you wanted her had only three days of their term to make out when she came, so for that time I kept her down in the kitchen with my missus, and would not let her see one of them, except when some of us was there to prevent them speaking to her. They are so awful set against Penitentiaries, since one or two of them have tried them, they'd have persuaded her on no account to hear a word you said for fear you sent her to one. However, you'll find I have kept the road clear for you; neither she nor the gals we've got in now have ever heard of you.'

'I am so glad to hear that,' said Ernestine; 'it would have been hard indeed to have lost her before I had even spoken to her. Has the chaplain seen her?'

'Well, he has seen her in the chapel at prayers, and he has said a word or two to her along with the rest; but bless you! he has not time to lay a finger on the souls of one of these poor wretches. He is a good man, and he'd like to do his best for them, but he can't be in four places at once, and he had need to be if he was to be of any real use as a parson; for I don't count just putting on his white gown and saying the prayers, or giving them a Bible-class altogether, as the parson's real work. I want to see him drag their souls back from

hell, and fight it out with the devil for each one of them ; and how is he to do that when he is chaplain of the workhouse at Burton as well as here at the prison, and when he has a church and a parish besides, and when he's got to take the chaplain's work at the other gaol when he happens to be ill, which that chaplain do happen to be pretty often ; and if that's not enough, this poor parson of ours has got private pupils at home, besides a wife and children to see to.'

'How strange!' said Ernestine; 'I thought there would have been a chaplain entirely devoted to the gaol. There must be quite work enough for one clergyman among so many prisoners.'

'Work enough and to spare ; but you see, ma'am, our great people here who manage these things, they looks to the money, and, judging by the salary they gives the chaplain, they must count the souls of these prisoners to be dear at half-a-crown apiece ; for he don't get so much, by a good deal, as you'd give your butler, ma'am. Well, he's got a wife and children, worse luck for him, and he must feed them ; and as he don't get much more at the workhouse than he does at the gaol, he has to try it on with a few more things to get enough for their food and clothing. These matters want looking into by some one who would have the power to set them right.

But it will soon be locking-up time, so if you please, ma'am, I'll tell my missus to bring Rosie Brown to you.' He rose and went out.

Ernestine almost trembled when she found herself waiting at last for the child whose fate had lain so heavy on her heart. The white still face of Lois seemed to rise up before her with its mute, mournful entreaty, and her heart thrilled with the earnest longing, that by any means she might have power to win the yet living soul of that dead girl's sister to repentance.

'There, gal, you go in there ; there's a lady wants to see you, and mind now how you behave, or you'll have a double lot of oakum-picking.' And Mrs. Bolton, who had not had time to perform a sufficiently elaborate toilette, opened the door, pushed in her charge, and closed it again without appearing.

Ernestine Courtenay was alone with Annie Brook. A young girl, in whom she at once recognised the original of the portrait, stood before her, and dropped a little curtsy as she met her gaze. She wore the prison dress, which, uncouth as it was, gave her an appearance of modesty and propriety she most probably would not have possessed in her own gay clothing. Her face had still much of the childish loveliness which her likeness had so well represented. The wealth of sunny hair was

there, escaping from under the coarse white cap, and the large blue eyes yet shone beneath it,—bright, though restless; but the sweet look of candour and innocence was gone, and the face was very pale and haggard, while an expression, half defiant and half sullen, had replaced the smiling gladness which was so characteristic in the sketch. Yes! she was the same;—yet how changed, deeper than the change from mortal life to death; for over her undying soul had passed the darkness of that great mystery which changed the Eden of God's creation to a world of chaotic sin and sorrow, whose mournful beauty ill contrasts with the moral evil that taints it everywhere. In this fair child's lingering loveliness there were yet dim traces of the Image in which she was first created; but on her spiritual being had fallen the dreadful desolation of unrepented sin.

Never before had Ernestine Courtenay thus stood face to face with one on whom the brand of social disgrace was indelibly marked, who, in addition to the secret stings of conscience, had the consciousness of that public degradation which entailed upon her the scorn or avoidance of all whose good name was yet untarnished; and she would have been expected, not only in her own caste, but even by those whose charity

made them seek to reclaim such sinners, to consider herself bound, for the sake of principle and the girl's own moral good, to hold her at an immeasurable distance, and teach her, by word and look and manner, the gulf which lies between the fallen and the pure. But, happily for Annie Brook, Ernestine followed the instincts of that inner sense with which the love of Christ had gifted her, and there was, though she knew it not, the deepest wisdom, as well as the truest charity, in her mode of action; for if ever human agency is to work for good upon the erring, it must be by the faint but true reflection of the one Love which alone gives hope of life and restoration to a ruined world; and, so far as regards the special class to which Annie Brook belonged, it is a short-sighted policy indeed which would suppose they require coldness and haughtiness on the part of the unfallen to teach the awful distance which lies between them. They know it already, these poor lost women. God help them! they know it with a bitterness of knowledge which brings keener anguish to their souls than the direst insult their fellow-creatures could inflict. Seldom, doubtless, does one of them, however hardened, look in the face of those who have not known their temptation or their sin, without a maddening sense of their own unspeakable loss, and an anguish of

envy, almost akin to that which the spirits of the lost might feel when gazing across the gulf to Paradise. It is not the religious aspect of their state which moves them. Most often they do not know of religion, even the name; but it is the innate instinct implanted in them by God, which makes them feel to their heart's core that purity is the one priceless treasure which marks the boundary between the soul's own inmost heaven and hell.

Ernestine Courtenay stretched out both hands to the fallen girl before her, and, clasping hers with a warm pressure, exclaimed, 'Dear Annie, I am so thankful to have found you!'

The girl looked up at her with a glance of surprise. 'Do you know me?' she said.

'Yes, Annie, though I have never seen you before I know you well, and I am your true friend. Sit down here beside me, and I will tell you why I have come to you.'

With evident reluctance, and shunning Ernestine's eyes, Annie did as she was told; but the sound of her real name, so long unheard, seemed to fill her with vague apprehensions that her conduct was about to undergo a scrutiny it could ill bear, and that the liberty of action she had so long misused would now be assailed. There was a good deal of sullen rebellion in her

expression as she sat beside Ernestine, rolling her apron-strings in her fingers, and looking determinately down at them. Ernestine was fully resolved to tell her Lois's whole history, as the surest mode of leading her to hate and dread her own wretched life, but she feared to shock her by too abrupt an announcement of her sister's death.

'Annie, I have come to you from one who loved you well,' she said.

A flood of crimson colour dyed the girl's fair face at these words. Her lips parted, and she turned to Ernestine with a half-uttered question. It was plain that her thoughts had flown to the man whose love had been her curse; but a dark remembrance seemed to come upon her; the glow died out, and was replaced by a look of dogged despair.

'There was few that ever loved me, and there are none now,' she said.

'You are mistaken there, my child; but the one who caused me to come here to look for you was your own sister, Lois.'

'Lois!' she said, with a sad bitterness; 'she has been my worst enemy; she and her fine make-believe husband. I would never have left father but for her, and then—I should never have been here.' She covered

her face with her hands, a flood of bitter memories coming over her.

‘I know,’ said Ernestine, ‘it was very cruel to take you from your home ; but poor Lois bitterly repented it, and you must not think unkindly of her now ; indeed you must not.’

Something in her tone struck the girl. She turned round—

‘Is anything wrong with Lois ? I left her gay enough, I am sure.’

‘It was a wretched gaiety, and had a wretched ending. Annie, you will never see Lois again in this world.’

‘Is she dead ?’ almost screamed the girl.

‘She is indeed ; poor Lois is already lying in her lonely grave.’

In an instant tears were bursting from the bright blue eyes, and a convulsion of grief, as brief as it was violent, passed over the impulsive girl. As she rocked to and fro in her wild sobbing, Ernestine gently held her hand, and smoothed the fair hair, till the soft tender touch unconsciously soothed her. After a few minutes her passionate agitation subsided ; she wiped her eyes, and, speaking in a gentle, humble tone, said—

‘Please to tell me all about her, ma’am.’

‘I will, my dear child,’ said Ernestine; ‘but it will be very sad for you to hear it.’ Then, conquering her repugnance to speak of her brother, she began: ‘You know the—the gentleman with whom Lois was living was not her husband?’

‘I know it—I know it; no more was he my husband who drew me from home with his fine promises, and then flung me on the streets to get my living.’

Ernestine sighed heavily as she thought of the countless similar victims whom selfish wickedness had driven to hopeless misery. She went on sadly—

‘Lois was deserted at last by this gentleman. After a time she heard he was going to India.’

‘Oh, that must have gone nigh to break her heart, she did love him so. Was that what killed her, ma’am?’

‘No,’ said Ernestine; ‘it would have been happier for her if she had died of a broken heart. She unwisely thought she could go to India with him, and came on board the ship where he was, and then she found he was married, and she had to go on shore and leave him.’

‘That would put Lois almost wild. What did she do, ma’am?’

‘The worst, the saddest thing she could do, Annie: she took away her own life; she drowned herself.’

‘Drowned herself! O poor Lois! O my poor darling sister! It’s too sad—it’s too hard. Oh, to think of her lying in the cold, cold water, all wet and cold and dead! And we used to sleep together, she and I; and she would cover me up so warm, and kiss me always first and last thing, night and morning. O it’s cruel—it’s cruel! Why did that bad man take her from her home to ruin her—and me? O it’s all so miserable. I wish I were dead, like her, and lying with her in the grave!’ And the sobs, which had been bursting from her through all her incoherent words, now fairly choked her; in a paroxysm of agony she flung herself on the floor; but Ernestine lifted her up, so that the poor sunny head, now brought so low, might rest upon her knees, and then she let her weep out there the grief that would have vent. Gradually she became more calm, and, quite exhausted, she lay like a tired child in Ernestine’s compassionate arms.

‘Annie,’ she said gently, after a time, ‘I think you will like to know that Lois’s last thought was for you, and the very last words she ever wrote were all for you alone. It is because of what she wrote then, that I am here.’

‘What did she say, ma’am? I should like to know,’ and she lifted up her head and listened anxiously.

‘She said that in the last most awful hour, when she was going to try and escape, by a guilty death, the sin and misery that seemed more than she could bear, her only wish, her only prayer was for you, that you might be rescued out of the life you were living, and saved from such a death as she was dying. She knew it was through her fault you had fallen away, and this was the bitterest thought in all the bitter grief that weighed her down. Annie, when Lois wrote that about you, she was very near the other world, where she would see face to face the God she had offended, and the Saviour she had forgotten; and she saw things then as they really are, and not as they appear to us when death seems far away, and this world everything. She saw how very short life is, and how quickly all its pains and pleasures pass, whether they be for good or evil. She saw and knew what a terrible madness, as well as sin, it is in us so to spend our little time on earth doing the devil’s will, not God’s, that when we come to die we have nothing but eternal punishment before us, instead of trying to lead good and holy lives, that we may be happy with the dear Lord Christ for ever. Annie, poor Lois had no hope for herself. She was going to die a sinful death, as she had lived a sinful life, but she thought there might still be hope for you; so she spent her last

moments upon earth in writing to the man who first led you both to evil, entreating him to find some means to save you out of your wretched life, and give you a chance of coming back to the blessed Lord who died for you, and still loves you, Annie, deeply as you have sinned against Him. The letter your poor sister wrote was given to me, and I only waited to see her laid in the grave, before I came to look for you, my child, and save you from your misery, if you will let me.'

The girl's face was bowed upon Ernestine's hands, which were wet with the tears she seemed to shed in silent hopelessness; and now she neither moved nor spoke, but only breathed long shuddering sighs, which shook her whole frame.

'Dear Annie,' said Ernestine, after a few moments' silence, 'will you not listen to Lois pleading with you from her very grave? and still more,' she added, in a low tone, 'will you not hear the voice of your departed Lord speaking to you from the blessed heaven, where He longs to have you with Himself?' And then, in words too solemn for these pages, she spoke to the lost child of the Love that suffered for her sin, and even now watched and waited for her in realms of deathless light. She spoke of the eternal desolation of the soul cut off from Him, and of the ineffable sweetness

of pardon that might yet be hers, if she sought the grace of true repentance, and washed the sin-stained garments of her soul in the precious Blood, which alone could make them white as snow. Long and earnestly, with glistening eyes and trembling voice, Ernestine spoke of the home beyond the grave, and the rest it gave from sin and temptation, from pain and weariness, and cruelty of man,—of the blessedness of laying down the tired head upon the Feet once pierced for us, in safety and in peace for evermore; and, with her whole heart in each word she uttered, she implored the fallen girl to break away from the hideous, loathsome evil that encompassed her, and fly for refuge to the Deathless Pity that never failed the repentant soul, how dark soever all past sin might be. ‘Annie, Annie, say that you will turn and repent,’ she added. ‘I cannot leave you till you have promised me to save your soul from living death.’

Then the girl flung out her hands passionately, and exclaimed—

‘What shall I do? Oh what shall I do? I know it’s a wicked and wretched life; and I thought at first I’d rather die than join in it; but he drove me to it—he, the only one I ever loved. Yes! he forced me to it, and told me it was all I was fit for now; he who ruined me;

and oh, when I heard that—when I knew that he thought me lost and degraded already—I did not care what came of me, and I tried to believe it was a gay life, as others said, and to forget everything, or I should have gone mad altogether; but oh! I have been wretched, and I am wretched now, and yet I can't leave it—I can't. He who took me away has deserted me for ever, and father will never look on me again; and Lois is dead, and I can never, never go back to what I was. Oh, why was I born? why was I born?' and she rocked herself from side to side in uncontrollable emotion.

That agony was upon her—the fiercest that human nature can ever know—the agony of regret for dark deeds done in the irrevocable past, which never, in all the everlasting ages, can be undone again! God help those who have known, and yet may know, the burning fire of that intolerable anguish!

Ernestine's intense power of sympathy made her thoroughly comprehend the living torture embodied in that writhing frame, and she let the girl's misery have its way for a time; then she gently took her hand, and said—

'Annie, my child, if you will only trust me, I will find you a home where you will be safe and peaceful, if not happy as you once were; and where, in a good and

useful life, you may win your way back to our blessed Lord, who is our only consolation and our only real joy. Say that you will trust me, dear child, and I will come for you the day you leave the gaol, and take you with me. You will come to me, will you not ?'

Annie lifted her head and looked at Ernestine ; and as she met the sweet eyes which were so full of pitying, pleading love, her heart seemed to melt within her. She let her head fall down again on the delicate hands which held her own, and said—

' You are so kind and good, I must do what you wish. I will go with you wherever you like.'

CHAPTER V.

THE REFUGE.

THUS far the victory was gained, and Ernestine was very thankful; but her interview with Annie Brook had roused her gentle nature to a degree of indignation against the man who had destroyed her, of which she could hardly have believed herself capable. When she wrote that evening to tell Lingard that she had really found the unhappy girl she had sought so long, she gave vent involuntarily to some of the strong feelings which moved her :—

‘ Apart from the actual wickedness of his conduct,’ she wrote, ‘ which lies of course between himself and his God alone, I could not have believed it possible that any man could have been, not only so cruel, but so cowardly and so mean as to rid himself of his victim when she became a burden to him, by forcing her into the last depths of sin and degradation, because his own treachery had made her, as he thought, fit for nothing else! And this pitiful selfish being is, no doubt, re-

ceived by his acquaintance as if he were good and honourable, instead of really deserving to be branded with a thousand times more of infamy and disgrace, than the poor child for whom he has prepared a life of misery here and eternal death hereafter. I hope this man will never cross my path in the course of my lifelong care of his victim, for I feel as if I could not breathe the same air with him ; nor would I consent to the smallest intercourse with such an one ; for I can no longer abide by the world's code of morals on this subject. It seems to me simply a mockery of the God of truth, and purity, and justice, whom we profess to worship, to visit the poor weak victim with the heaviest punishment, casting her out like the leper of old, while we allow the greater criminal to come amongst us not only unscathed, but welcomed and honoured.'

Ernestine received no direct answer to this letter ; but a day or two later, Lingard wrote, urging her most warmly, now that her object was accomplished, to come to London, and let arrangements at once be made for their marriage. He was now certain of the appointment he had been expecting, and there was no further reason for delay, excepting her brother's recent death ; and he trusted she would not think it necessary

to wait till the period of her mourning had quite expired. Ernestine answered by promising to come to town the following week, so soon as she had placed her charge in some safe refuge ; and as it was now early in May, she agreed that their marriage should take place in the course of the summer.

In the meantime, her great anxiety was to provide a safe home for poor Annie, before the time when her term of imprisonment expired, which would be in the course of a few days. She knew that there were now, happily, various 'Homes' and Penitentiaries where such an one could be received ; but she had no idea where it would be best to apply. She therefore wrote a line to Thorold, telling him she had been thus far successful in persuading Annie to begin the work of repentance, and begging him to tell her where it would be wisest to place the poor child. He came to her that same evening on his way to the night-school, just as Mrs. Thompson, attired in elaborate slight mourning, was starting for a dinner-party at the Granbys'. Ernestine inwardly rejoiced at the fortunate circumstance which prevented her chaperon from assisting at a conversation which was likely to make her hair stand on end ; for poor Ernestine's interest in Annie Brook had not in the slightest degree shaken Mrs. Thompson's allegiance to

the orthodox theory, that such individuals, and the Homes that shelter them, should be simply ignored, and considered non-existent by all persons of 'good society.' Whether the privileges of good society were to extend into the other world, when the proscribed class, and those who might have saved them, met face to face, was not a question into which this well-bred lady thought it necessary to enter. Mrs. Tompson was, however, by no means satisfied to forego her proper duties as Ernestine's chaperon.

'A most extraordinary hour for a morning call!' she exclaimed, as she heard Thorold coming up the stair. 'Introduce me, my dear,' she added in a whisper, as he appeared.

This ceremony Ernestine performed with a smile lurking on her lips, which Thorold quickly detected.

'I have much pleasure in making your acquaintance, Mr. Thorold,' said Mrs. Tompson, with a sweeping salutation, to which he responded with the utmost gravity; 'but unhappily it is rather late: I am on the point of going to dine with Dr. and Mrs. Granby. Miss Courtenay does not go out in consequence of her recent bereavement, and is, I think, fatigued; but if you could give us the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow, instead of this evening, we should then both be able to receive you.'

‘I am afraid I cannot at all answer for what I may be doing to-morrow,’ he answered quietly; ‘but I think Miss Courtenay can spare me a few minutes now. Will you allow me to conduct you to your carriage, which I see is waiting?’ and he offered his arm with such exquisite politeness, that Mrs. Tompson was fain to accept it, and allow her silks to rustle down stairs in company with his rough great-coat, as if they were most congenial companions. He placed her in the carriage, told the coachman to drive on, and having satisfactorily despatched her, came up the stairs two or three steps at a time.

‘You have asked me a difficult question,’ he said, plunging into his subject at once, as he sat down. ‘I doubt if I can recommend any Penitentiary to you, which would be likely to suit a girl of so impulsive a temperament as Annie Brook.’

‘Do you not approve of the system on which they are conducted?’ asked Ernestine.

‘I approve of their theory, but not of their practice. The state of the case is just this:—Some years ago, a strong impetus was given to the exercise of charity on behalf of that unhappy class. It was shown to be a black stigma on our country, that they should be left to perish by thousands, with scarce an effort made for their

rescue; and it was further demonstrated, with great truth, that the only persons who could undertake their reformation, with any chance of success, would be earnest, religious women of the upper ranks, who would be willing, for the love of Christ, to devote themselves to so painful task. Thus far, nothing could be better. The principles on which they started were sound in themselves, and their fruits were the same up to a certain point. Many Homes for the Fallen were established all over the country, and good women were found to conduct them, whose saintly self-denial, and true devotion of heart and soul, are beyond praise. So far as they themselves and their honesty of purpose are concerned, not a disparaging word can be said; they are living for others in the true abnegation of self, which is the sure test of Christ's people; and I doubt not that they will be of those who, in the day of His glory, will be astonished at the greatness of their salvation, so far beyond what they looked for; but all this does not prevent the fact that they have, as I believe, started on a mistaken system, so far as the treatment of these poor sinners is concerned, which has greatly marred their success. They begin with the fatal error of dealing with those unhappy girls, as if they were, what they are called—*penitents*; whereas not one in a

hundred has even such knowledge of God, and of a future state, as would enable them to understand what penitence means. And, building on this erroneous foundation, they fix for them a rule of life, which none but persons not only heart-broken with remorseful sorrow for sin, but possessing also cultivated minds and highly-wrought religious feelings, could endure for any length of time. I cannot enter into details; but, generally speaking, the system in our Penitentiaries is one of great over-legislation; of unchanging conventual strictness; of iron rule binding on the corporate body without relaxation for individual temperament or circumstances; of monotonous duties, irksome punishments, religious services too often, which they do not understand; and an almost total deprivation of open air and exercise. Add to this, that the exemplary ladies who guard them have conceived the unfortunate idea, that instead of working on their affections, they are to teach them the difference between the holy and the fallen, by treating them with distance and coldness, and by rigorously demanding, and enforcing by penalties, the highest respect to themselves as their superiors,—and you will have some of the causes which have rendered these Homes more repugnant to their inmates than the gaol, as they themselves say, and which makes

them, with few exceptions, so unwilling to remain, or to return to them a second time. And this brings me to my difficulty : I cannot tell you of any one of those Refuges where I think you can place Annie Brook, with any hope that she will be able to endure the rigid discipline long enough to work a real reform.'

'I am sure Annie is not a girl who could stand severity,' said Ernestine, 'especially after the lawless independence of her present life; but have none of these Homes profited by their non-success, so far as to see the necessity of a change? Have none of the more recently formed been induced by the experience of others to alter their system?'

Thorold shrugged his shoulders. 'We human beings are strangely gregarious,' he said, 'after the manner of sheep, who will all, one after another, press through the gap the first has made in the hedge, though there is an open gate a little way beyond. These excellent people have religiously followed in each other's steps; each newly established Refuge receiving its "Rules" and form of discipline from one of the elder Homes. I cannot tell you the vexation with which I hear, whenever a new Penitentiary is about to be commenced, that a lady from one of the other Refuges has been sent to teach the persons engaged to work in it, the "proper"

system of management, so that each one is firmly planted in the mistakes of its predecessors. However, there is such true love for souls, and such unselfish zeal in those who thus devote themselves to the fallen, that I feel sure in time they will learn a happier mode of dealing with them, and I do not mean to say that even now they are uniformly unsuccessful; far from it. The earnestness and holiness of the workers cannot fail to bring a blessing on the work, and although the souls they have saved are, as I believe, few in comparison with the numbers they might have rescued on a different system, yet the salvation of even one soul is more than worth all that the Home could ever cost; so you must not suppose I would discourage any one from giving them the utmost sympathy and assistance in their power. Whenever one of these unhappy women enters a Penitentiary from any motive sufficiently strong to induce her to bear the irksome rules, the confinement, and severity, long enough to let the good teaching she receives awaken some spark of real repentance in her heart, it becomes then possible for her to submit to all that is so galling and depressing as a needful chastisement for her sin, and we must hope that this may be the case with Annie Brook. If you can win her personal love to yourself, you will have

done a great deal towards her ultimate rescue: for where the love of God does not exist, human affection is the only other impulse that can work for good within the soul, though in a feeble and uncertain way. It is often allowed to serve as a guide to the higher, purer love, and it can at least accomplish what haughtiness and severity could never effect.'

'You do not think then that there is any preference to be given to one of these Homes above another?'

'I think not; they have all the same advantages, and the same defects. I will give you the names of several, and you had better take your charge to the first which has a vacancy. I trust you may not find that in some particular, she is not eligible for reception there, according to the rules of admission, which seem to be generally framed with the peculiar property of frustrating the object of the charity, by rendering it scarcely possible for the poor creatures to effect an entrance to the Home built expressly for them. They are very generous in taking them in free of charge, but you will like, no doubt, to offer some payment for Annie, and you will do well, as the funds of all these Refuges are scanty enough, I fear.'

Ernestine thought it only right that the girl should be supported at her expense, and having somewhat magnificent notions in such respects, she offered a sum

sufficiently large to be of great use to the 'Home' where they agreed to take Annie Brook on her application. There was, however, one absolute condition made to her reception, besides various hints as to what would be expected of her, and this was that she should be able to bring with her a certificate of perfect health—about the last thing which one of her class would be likely to find possible. In this emergency Ernestine applied to Dr. Compton, who went at once to the gaol to see the girl, and on his return he told Ernestine he considered her in a very feeble and precarious state of health.

'There is no organic complaint at present,' he said, 'and nothing certainly which need prevent her being received at the refuge, so that I can give her a certificate; but there is extreme debility and exhaustion of the system, and, like too many of her class, she will die a premature death on the first occasion when her powers are in any way unusually taxed.'

'And can nothing be done to restore her, or prevent such a result?' said Ernestine.

'You can only use preventive means. Quiet, good food, and plenty of fresh air in fine weather, will give her the best chance for life. She must guard against exposure to cold. Whatever happens, you can have the comfort of feeling that if you had not taken her out of

her present life, she would not have lived six months longer in it.'

If anything could have deepened Ernestine's anxiety about the unhappy child, it would have been this opinion. Her time for repentance was likely to be short; how earnestly she trusted nothing would occur to mar it.

The day of Annie's release from prison came at last, and at seven in the morning Ernestine was at the gaol to receive her into her own safe keeping. This was the gaoler's wise arrangement, for Ernestine, in her ignorance, had been quite ready to let Annie go to her lodgings first, for the various effects she had left there.

'Bless my heart,' said old Bolton, when he heard this proposal, 'how precious innocent these ladies be, to be sure! Miss Courtenay, if you want to make very sure that you'll never set eyes on Rosie Brown again, you'll just let her go off to Mother Dorrell's when she goes out from here.'

'They would not keep her by force, would they?' asked Ernestine.

'They wouldn't need to, for they could soon persuade her to stop; and if so be they couldn't, though that ain't likely, they would just give her a neat little

glass of gin to keep her spirits up, and a drop of something besides in it, and she'd be asleep in five minutes, and then, when she woke up, they'd say you had never come for her, and a blessed thing too, for they had found out you were going to shut her up in a place worse than the black-hole; and then they'd say there was a fine new hat some one had brought for her; and see if you or any one else could ever lay a finger on her after that.'

'What had I better do then?' said Ernestine.

'Well, I'm bound to let her out by seven in the morning; it's against the law to keep her longer, and you had best be here to take care of her as soon as she is out of my hands. If you take my advice, you'll have her off by the train as fast as ever you can; it's pretty sure there'll be some bad 'un sneaking about outside the gaol waiting for her, but they'll not venture to show themselves if she's with you. I'll send a policeman to Mother Dorrell's for her clothes, and he'll take the bundle straight to the railway station, so you'll be all right, if she does not make off on the road.'

The Refuge where Annie was to be received was at some distance from Greyburgh, so that Ernestine was well pleased to start early; and having persuaded Mrs. Tompson to go on to London by a later train, she

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found herself at the gaol before seven on a glorious summer morning.

The gaoler told her that Rosie Brown was exchanging her prison-dress for her own clothes, and as Ernestine preferred waiting among the flower-beds, with which the court-yard of the prison was embellished, he gallantly plucked some lily of the valley, which grew under the shade of the high wall, and presented it to her. Then he went in to complete the formularies of Annie Brook's release. Ernestine remained looking at the flowers he had given her, the lovely little snow white bells showing spotless against the fresh green leaves, still glittering with the early dew; then she gazed up to the cloudless morning sky—one bright expanse of limpid blue—and felt around the cool untainted air, which scarce that day had met the breath of man, and saw in them all but faint reflections of the eternal beauty and purity of the Creative Mind; and there awoke in her soul that intense longing which sometimes overpowers us, for the coming of the sinless kingdom, when the Divine One, who alone passed holy and stainless through this world's pollutions, shall reign in righteousness; when over all the glorious renewed creation there shall not be a blot or shadow, and when through the myriad hosts that then shall live eternally to

love Him, there shall not be one who bears upon the soul a taint of evil. 'O Lord, how long?' she could have asked, with the souls that were bid to wait in their white robes beneath the heavenly altar till their brethren should be fulfilled; but far off in the inscrutable mystery of the Divine Will that radiant vision lies, and she had only meantime her one brief life wherewith to struggle through her little part, in the accomplishment of its desired fulfilment.

The gaoler's voice, telling her that his prisoner was delivered over to her, woke her rudely from these thoughts; and she started in complete astonishment at the sight which presented itself when she looked round. Annie Brook stood in the doorway of the prison, as if in a picture-frame, dressed in a costume, in which there could be no doubt she looked strikingly beautiful, but which was much more fitted for the stage than for a walk through the streets to the railway station. A little white hat with a scarlet feather rested lightly on her sunny hair, which fell its whole length in waving masses almost to her waist; and she wore a red cloak of somewhat fantastic shape, over a dress of silver grey. The excitement of the moment had brightened her large blue eyes, and brought a vivid colour into her cheeks, contrasting with the waxen white which was

now apparently her habitual complexion. Lovely she certainly looked, but strangely out of keeping with the place and the purpose for which she was equipped; and Ernestine, willing as she was to undergo pain and annoyance on Annie's account, thought with no small dismay of the observation she would excite walking through the streets with such a companion, and there was no longer time to send for a carriage. Mrs. Bolton, however, who came out with the girl, was equal to the occasion. 'Ah! I see what you are thinking of, Miss Courtenay. She looks more fit to go and dance as Columbine with Harlequin, than to walk through the streets with a lady like you. Here, gal, you just pull that red feather out of your hat, and put it in your pocket; and take off that flashy cloak, fit to set a bull crazy, and I'll lend you a decent black shawl, which the lady 'll send safe back to me, I make no doubt.'

'That I certainly will, and thank you very much,' said Ernestine; and Annie, flushing crimson, began with feverish haste to obey Mrs. Bolton's direction.

'Here,' said the old woman, 'give me the cloak, and I'll wrap it in a bundle for you to take with you, and then you'll have it at hand if so be you should want it where you be agoing;' and she winked to Ernestine, with a significance which showed she thought this a

piece of exquisite sarcasm. Annie was soon more suitably attired, and walked beside Ernestine down to the gate, which the gaoler himself held open for them.

‘Good-bye, my gal,’ he said to Annie. ‘I hope I may never see you here again; and that’s about the best wish I can make for you; for I’ve turned the key on some of your sort as good as a hundred times. You go and do whatever that lady tells you first and last, and you may be a bright woman yet. And as to you, ma’am,’ he added, turning to Ernestine, ‘if so be I don’t happen to see you here again, I’ll see you in heaven as sure as I’m alive, for you’re as safe to get there as ever was Moses and Aaron, or any of these fine Bible fellows. Bless you, you’ll go up as straight as a sky-rocket, you will.’ With which favourable prediction he closed the gate, and left Ernestine alone with her charge.

So long as they were traversing the square in which the gaol stood, Annie walked quietly by her side, never looking up, and seeming scarcely to breathe; but when they got into the streets, she began to gaze from side to side, with a quick, restless movement of the eyes, like those of a startled fawn, when it comes suddenly from a wood to the open country. Her cheek was flushed, her breathing hurried, and she seemed hardly able to

control her nervous excitement. Occasionally, she gave a sudden glance towards Ernestine, which, if the latter had had a little more experience, might have alarmed her considerably for the safe conduct of her charge, but Ernestine knew nothing of the impulsive, irritable temperament, which is induced by such a life as Annie had been leading. As they proceeded on their way to the station, they passed out of the streets, and came to a road where the green fields were to be seen on either side, and Annie's excitement seemed to increase.

'Oh! I wish I were out running in those fields,' she exclaimed. 'Ma'am, I hope you are not going to shut me up, where you're taking me; I couldn't bear it—indeed I couldn't. There was this good in my life before,' she added, 'I could do just as I liked, with no one to stop me, whatever I fancied.'

'But you see, Annie dear, you did very badly for yourself, when you did as you liked. Where you are going now, you will learn to lead a better life, and you will wonder you could ever bear to do as you have done.' Annie seemed scarcely to hear her, so anxiously was she looking round. The station had now appeared in sight.

'We shall be just in time,' said Ernestine. 'There

is the train almost ready to start.' At these words the girl made a sudden movement ; but at the same moment the little terrier Fury, who was trotting quietly on in front, turned right round and ran furiously at Annie, barking with such violence that she screamed aloud, and flew back to Ernestine, catching hold of her arm in her terror. Ernestine took her hand and quieted the dog, wondering much at his strange violence ; and so long as Annie remained close to her side, he made no further demonstration beyond a watchful glance of his eloquent brown eyes ; but if she moved even a step forward, he barked angrily again, till Annie fairly clung to Ernestine in great trepidation ; and so they reached the station, just in time to take their places in the train before it started. Long afterwards, Annie told Ernestine that at the moment the dog barked at her, she had, in her longing for freedom, finally made up her mind to run away from her, and hide in a house not far off, where she knew Ernestine could never have obtained access to her. By what instinct the dog divined her purpose, and by what mysterious ray of light he knew that he must save her from the dark temptation which assailed her, none can say ; but the fact that a little Skye terrier did, by his sudden barking, stop the flight of a reckless soul to its destruction, is no fiction, but a

very truth, to which the poor sinner herself bore witness.

From the moment they entered the railway carriage Annie seemed to resign herself. She sat beside Ernestine, with her hands listlessly folded on her lap, and her head drooping, as if she cared little what became of her. After a time, when they were alone in the carriage, she said—

‘Miss Courtenay, does father know poor Lois is dead?’

‘Yes, the coroner wrote to him about her, and I saw him myself afterwards.’

‘And was he sorry?’

‘I am sure he was, but he did not like to speak of her.’

‘No, because she had disgraced him, as I have done;’ and tears gathered in her eyes as she spoke. ‘Father was often sharp to Lois, because she was so high-spirited, but he was always kind to me. When Lois wrote and bid me come to her, I left a letter, telling him I had only gone to see her. I was a bad girl to go, for I knew father would be vexed; but I never meant to stay; and next day father sent me a letter to say if I’d come back then and there, he’d take me in before my Lady knew I was gone, and look over it; but that he’d never see me again if I went and did as Lois had done. And oh, Miss Courtenay! I did so want to go back to

him ; and I would have gone, if Mr. Brown would have let me, for all I loved him better than any one else in the world.'

'You had known him before, then ?' said Ernestine.

'Yes, he was staying at the Hall, and when I went walking he used to come and talk to me, and be so kind to me, and he gave me such a many pretty things, and I loved him with all my heart ; but I knew he was a gentleman, far above me, and I tried so hard to forget him ; and oh, Miss Courtenay, it was very sweet to see him again at Lois's house : but still, when I got father's letter I said I would go back ; and I knew poor Lois wished it, for she told me she would never have brought me there if she could have helped it ; and Mr. Brown over-persuaded me not to go, and said if I'd come with him I should have everything in the world I wished. But still I said I'd go home, ma'am, for I had heard the names Lois had been called in the village, and then Mr. Brown said, Well, I should go then, but he'd drive me himself to the station, and go part of the way with me, and I was pleased at that, for I loved him so it half broke my heart to part with him ; and he fetched such a beautiful carriage and horses,—I so enjoyed going out in it with him ! But I remember so well—oh, so well !—as I stood on the doorstep looking

at the carriage, Lois came and took tight hold of my hand, and whispered, "Annie, don't go with him; for the love of God don't go; I'll send and get a cab to take you to the train, and see you off myself!" And I stood thinking what I should do, when Mr. Brown turned round and held out his hand, looking so smiling and bright, and bid me come, for it was all ready, and we should have such a nice drive to the station; and I went; but oh, Miss Courtenay, I've thought of that moment over and over again, till I have been almost mad, for it was my last chance. If I'd refused to go with him, and let Lois take me to the train, I'd have gone straight home, and father would have taken me in, and I'd never have brought disgrace on him and ruin on myself; and I might have been good and happy, and held up my head with the best of them. Oh, if only I could get that moment back again, if only I could!' and she literally writhed on her seat, in the impotent longing for that which could never be hers again while the universe lasted. Poor child, she thought perhaps that none could suffer as she did then; but there are probably few amongst us who do not know what it is to look back to some point in our own life, when our destinies in this world, and perhaps in the next, were yet in our hands for good or for ill, and when, in our

blindness and madness, we chose the fair-seeming evil, and let the good slip through our fingers for ever and for ever. Earth has no anguish greater than the hopeless passionate yearning for such a moment to return. It would have been so easy then to have taken a different course—yes, even if it cost a pang; but now, not tears of blood, not the rending of soul and body, not the bringing down of heaven with prayers, could give that one omnipotent moment back again! Ernestine saw what she was suffering, and tried gently to soothe her.

‘And did Mr. Brown take you to the train?’ she said, wishing to draw her thoughts away from the one recollection which seemed to madden her.

‘Yes, but not to take me,—oh, not to take me home! When we got to the station he said he’d go a bit of the way with me, and I was very, very glad to have him a little longer, but I never doubted I was going straight to father’s till I saw the towers of Greyburgh; then he told me he had brought me there because he could not bear to part with me, and he said I couldn’t go back now, for father would never take me in, after I had gone off like that alone with a gentleman, and Lois couldn’t, for he knew she was not going to stay where she was, and that I had not a friend in the world but him now, and I must trust him, for he loved me well; and he

said he'd give me a pretty house to live in ; and when I still cried, and said I must go to father, he said perhaps some day he'd marry me, and so I stayed with him ; and the end of all his love and all his promises has been that now I am in the railway train again, going from a gaol to a penitentiary ;' and without saying another word she remained silent, shedding hopeless tears, which seemed to give no relief to her aching heart ; and Ernestine thought, mournfully, of the awful guilt, that surely must one day call for vengeance, on the man who could with such dark treachery compass a fellow-creature's ruin. In this world he would walk unchallenged among his equals—respected, it might be—and happy as those can be whom selfishness and worldliness have hardened into enjoyment of the pleasures of life, even though their existence is weighted with the murder of an immortal soul. That is a crime which on this earth is neither recognised nor punished ; but how will it be when its black hideousness is exposed before the face of Him who sits upon the great white throne ?

Once only Annie spoke again as they went on their way. She lifted up her head, and said to Ernestine, ' Miss Courtenay, will you tell father that I have never been called by my own name, so at least I have not brought disgrace on his ? Lois said, when I went there,

I should never be called by it, for she had heard how mad it made father to have her spoken of as she was in our village ; so when Mr. Brown asked her my name, for he had not heard it at the Hall, she said he might call me what he pleased, for he should never know my true name any more than hers. She called herself Mrs. George, so he said then he'd call me Rosie, for I was just like a rose ; and I had on a brown dress, so he said I should be Rosie Brown, and he'd be Mr. Brown. I don't know now what his own name was, but he never knew mine.'

'I will tell your father, dear Annie ; I am sure he will be glad to know that you are going to a safe home now.'

At length the painful journey was over, and Ernestine and her charge had reached the door of the Refuge.

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, if only you were going to stay with me !' said Annie, clinging to her as they stood waiting. 'I love you, and I'd do anything for you, but I am afraid of being shut up here.'

The door was opened by a lady, who locked it again so soon as they were inside ; and as Ernestine gave her name she glanced at Annie, saying, 'The penitent, I suppose ?' Then she opened the door of a small room, and told Annie to wait there till she could attend to

her. The girl did as she was told, and was locked in; and Ernestine was then conducted through various long and somewhat gloomy corridors to a large comfortable sitting-room. Here her guide left her to call the lady who superintended the establishment; and this latter soon made her appearance. She was very courteous and kind to Ernestine herself, but she listened to her account of Annie Brook with a certain sternness, and did not seem to think there was so much excuse for her as Ernestine was disposed to find in the circumstances of her ruin. It was evident, too, that she gave not the slightest weight to Miss Courtenay's anxious explanations of Annie's impulsive and sensitive disposition, which would make her so easily led by any appeal to her affections, and so fatally repelled by harshness.

'We treat all our penitents alike, of course,' she said calmly; 'I cannot undertake to show any special favour to this girl.'

'I should not think of asking you to do so,' said Ernestine, 'only, individual temperament must surely be considered in the manner in which they are spoken to, and in their treatment in all that concerns themselves separately?'

'Our rules embrace the whole course of their management, and to them we adhere.'

‘But your object is to save individual souls. Surely you leave yourselves the power of such relaxation as may sometimes be required by special circumstances?’

‘Our first consideration must be the general good of the penitents and the peace of the house, which can only be attained by strict conformity to rule; also,’ she added, with a smile which was gently disdainful, ‘from what you tell me of your wishes with regard to this penitent, I am not disposed to think that our views would be the same as to the most fitting mode of treatment for her.’

‘You have experience and I have none,’ said Ernestine courteously. ‘In any case, I am sure you will do your best for this poor child. Circumstances have caused me to take a deep interest in her, and I feel very anxious for her future. I am afraid I must go now, however, leaving her in your safe keeping, for I must travel to town by the express.’

‘I am sorry to detain you, but I must beg you to wait a few minutes. I have sent one of the ladies to read the rules to Annie Brook; and it must depend, of course, on her promising to abide by them whether I can retain her in the house.’

‘Oh, I trust they are not very formidable!’ exclaimed Ernestine; ‘she is so timid and excitable that she is

very likely to be dismayed at first by what might afterwards seem easy to her.'

'No penitent is admitted who does not promise to comply with the rules,' was the inflexible answer. Presently there came a light knock at the door, and the lady went out. In a few minutes she returned—

'I am very sorry to distress you, Miss Courtenay, but I fear you must take this young woman back with you. She has refused to give the necessary promise that she will stay two years.'

'Oh, surely she is not obliged to promise that at present?' exclaimed Ernestine. 'Of course, it is all new and strange to her. She cannot possibly tell whether she would be content to remain two years. I do not think any one could do so on first entering upon a life of which they knew nothing.'

'It is our rule,' was the lady's answer.

Ernestine was in despair. 'Will you let me talk to her, and perhaps I can persuade her to say what you would wish?'

'Certainly,' said the lady, and she was conducted back through the long corridors to the little room where Annie was sitting in a corner, crying as if her heart would break. She flew to Ernestine the moment she saw her—

‘ Oh, Miss Courtenay, take me away from here. I shall never be able to bear it. They say I must promise to stay two whole years, and that’s just like a lifetime. I can’t promise to let myself be shut up among strangers all that while ; and there’s such a many things I am to do and I am not to do, I am frightened to death at it all. Tell them to let me out. I must go away.’

‘ But, Annie dear,’ said Ernestine soothingly, ‘ where would you go to ? I am sure you don’t want to go back to your wickedness, and it is impossible for you to get an honest living anywhere without a character. I am sure you could not bring yourself to go to the workhouse if you went out from here, could you ?’

‘ O no, no !’ said Annie, shuddering.

‘ Well, that is the only other place where you could be safe from the sin that is bringing you to destruction. Surely you will say that you will try and stay two years, rather than let yourself be drawn away again from the merciful God who is calling you to repentance ?’

‘ I don’t want to do wrong again,’ said Annie ; ‘ but I can’t promise to stay in this place two years.’

‘ Annie, it would be better to die than do wrong. Yes,’ she continued, as the girl looked up surprised, ‘ it would be better to die in any tortures than to sin against our Father in heaven, for our Saviour tells us Himself

not to fear those who can only kill the body, and then have nothing more that they can do, but to fear Him who has power to cast both soul and body into hell. Annie, think of Lois. Her body is lying in the cold grave, and her soul is gone to wait the dreadful judgment-day. If she could come back to earth again, do you not think she would be only too thankful to have two years, or twenty, or a thousand given her in this house for repentance? Oh my dear child, what need it matter to any of us what we have to bear in our short lives here, if only we find mercy with our dear Lord at the last? He died to save you: will you not suffer a little to go to Him?’

‘Oh, Miss Courtenay, I could bear anything if you were going to stay with me.’

‘But I will come and see you often, Annie dear, and I will write to you. Now, you will let me tell the ladies you will try and stay two years, will you not?’

‘I would do anything to please you,’ said Annie, and Ernestine went at once for the lady, who was in the next room, and having returned with her to Annie, she told her the girl would try and stay two years.

‘You must not only try, you must do it,’ said the lady very decidedly, and then Ernestine took leave of Annie, with a warm pressure of the hand and a few words

of kind encouragement, to which the poor girl's sobs prevented her from making any answer. Ernestine caught the last look of her blue eyes wistfully turned towards her as the door closed, and she could not resist a final entreaty to the lady, to treat with as much indulgence as she could, one of so impressible and affectionate a disposition. 'I forgot too to tell you that the doctor who wrote her certificate considers her in a very feeble state. He does not think she can live long.'

'That is very likely,' said the lady. 'It has been proved by statistics that the average length of these girls' career is from four to five years; but the good food and quiet of this house may do much for her.'

Ernestine then quitted the Refuge, knowing that she left Annie in safety for the present, and it was with a feeling of intense thankfulness that she looked back over all the difficulties she had surmounted, and felt that she had been thus far able to keep the pledge she had given to the dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLOUDS BEGIN TO GATHER.

THE month which followed this day of anxiety was one of such deep happiness to Ernestine Courtenay that the memory of it haunted her to the very hour of her death. She tasted then to the full the sweetness which the human heart can sometimes know even in this perishing world. Long after, when all the sunshine had faded out of her life, and existence lay around her like a dim landscape at eventide, where the shadows fall heavily on earth, and the only brightness is in the sunset gleam which seems to open a vista to the purer land, the thought of that little time of exquisite joy would come back to her, as in the gloom of a northern winter the recollection returns of the perfumes and beauty of a southern clime. She had no misgivings while the bright weeks were passing that it was happiness too great to last, nor did she seem to hear, as some have done, the footsteps of the coming sorrow echoing down the long dim aisles of the future. She gave her-

self up to the trusting love which filled her heart, and let it flood her whole being with its ineffable joys. There was not a shadow on the radiance with which it surrounded her; not a doubt, not a fear. The undercurrent of sadness which the thought of both her brothers would ever leave for her beneath all the enjoyments of this world, had not power to mar the intense personal happiness which she found in Hugh Lingard's love. He had from the first been passionately attached to her, but there was an inexplicable change in his bearing towards her, which was calculated to have the deepest charm for one so gentle and warm-hearted as Ernestine Courtenay. There was a tender reverence in his manner now, a loving devotion which was unwearied in seeking how to please her. He seemed to hang on every word she spoke, as if he longed to learn from her on all points, and to bring his very thoughts into accordance with hers, if that were possible. He did not now, any more than formerly, make professions of religious faith, and Ernestine's own convictions on that subject had greatly deepened since she had of late been brought so near to some of the great mysteries of the soul, in life and in death; but she had ever believed Hugh Lingard to be good, and pure, and chivalrous, as the knights of old, and she hoped now more than ever,

that he did hold a true religion in the hidden depths of his spirit, though he mistrusted himself too much to show it openly, and that it yet would find its full development in the life they hoped to lead together. In this she was deceived. Whatever change there was in Hugh Lingard had not sprung from any clearer perception of the truth of God than that to which he had attained when she first became engaged to him.

Very little was said between them on the subject of Annie Brook. Ernestine had fulfilled her promise of keeping Lingard *au courant* of her proceedings at Greyburgh, but of course the subject was one on which it was painful to her to speak ; and after having told him that her mind was now at rest in the knowledge that the poor child was safe in the Refuge, she said no more, and Hugh Lingard himself never alluded to the subject. Her account of Reginald's state of mind before his death confirmed him in his original belief, that it was as a victim of this young brother Ernestine had felt bound to find the girl out. Ernestine had purposely avoided ever giving Mr. Brown's name in any of her letters, as she thought it not unlikely, since he had been her brother George's friend, that Hugh might also have some slight acquaintance with him ; and she was too honourable to reveal the dark secrets of a man's hidden life, acquired in such a

manner. There was a vein of sadness in all Hugh Lingard said which touched her very much, and which she had never known in him before; but she only laboured the more earnestly to show, how entirely she would care for his happiness when it became her first earthly duty. The preparations for their marriage were now going on rapidly, and it had been fixed to take place in three months from the time of Ernestine's return to London. And so the golden hours floated on for Ernestine, brightened with sweetest hope, and precious already by the human sympathy which has so marvellous a charm for every living heart. Then suddenly came the first mutterings of the gathering storm, though she failed to perceive their import.

One day, when she was sitting alone in the drawing-room, her aunt having gone out, the mid-day post brought her a letter from the Refuge. It contained the news that Annie Brook had the evening before made her escape from the Home. She had, the writer stated, been gradually growing more and more restless, and had shown symptoms of rebellion against some of the rules, especially the 'silence times.' These, the writer explained, were periods during the day when entire silence was enforced on the penitents, as a form of discipline, and when they were required to perform their various duties

in each other's society without the utterance of a single word. To this Annie had objected, on what the lady termed the 'unreasonable ground' that 'she could not bear her own thoughts.' The half-hour between 1 and 1.30 was divided between 'mid-day prayers and recreation,'—the only recreation allowed during the day, and on having been summoned from this brief respite to enter upon the afternoon 'silence time,' Annie had refused to obey. For this act of disobedience she was locked up in the 'punishment-room,' and sentenced to remain there, on a diet of bread and water, till she was properly humbled. When visited in the evening it was found that she had made her escape through the window, at the risk of breaking her neck. Nothing had been heard of her since, and the letter concluded with the announcement that even if she were found, she could never again be received at the Home, as Miss Courtenay no doubt would easily understand.

Ernestine's first impulse was to fling the letter from her, and clasp her hands in dismay, while something like a groan escaped her. Had it then all been in vain? Had all her efforts, her longings, her endurance, been useless after all? Was the unhappy child lost whom she had so struggled to save from destruction? A pang of keen remorse shot through her heart: was it perhaps

her own fault after all? She knew that Annie loved her, and she remembered how Thorold had warned her, that a human affection was almost the only influence which could be brought to bear on a heart still dead to the love of God: had she not too long neglected to use her power over that wayward soul? She had promised to go and see her; Annie had depended upon it; and she had let a whole month slip by in the golden light of her own deep happiness, which had seemed to hide from her charmed eyes all the darkness and sorrow of the world without. She had written to the girl, it was true, but it was one of the rules of the Home that the penitents were to write letters only once a month, so that Annie had never yet had the opportunity of telling her whether she were contented with her position or not.

There are few, probably, of those who think deeply, who have not known at times a feeling of overwhelming dismay and almost terror, at the thought of the whole world lying in wickedness round them, while they are living in quiet and comfort, full of their own hopes and fears, and lifting not so much as a finger to stem the awful tide of woe and sin, which is for ever engulfing so many deathless spirits in its fatal depths. Such a feeling, fraught with keenest remorse, plunged Ernestine's very soul in anguish now, for it came with the special

sting which the thought of Annie Brook's fatal disappearance had power to give it. Here had been one, but one soul, out of the myriads daily perishing, given for its salvation into her own hands by the marked providence of God, and she had carelessly let it slip from her grasp. She had neglected, she had lost it! She had been wrapped in her own selfish love, intoxicated with her own selfish happiness. She had been revelling in hours of joy, in all that makes this world most dear. She had left that poor, weak, fainting soul to battle alone in the bitter waters of repentance, till she made shipwreck among them, while the only friend she loved was not at hand to save her. Oh, how Ernestine hated and despised herself as she thought of it,—she who had let her own sweet moments of earthly bliss weigh heavier in the balance than the eternal safety of that immortal soul! Probably she blamed herself too severely, and the fault did not in actual fact lie with her in this particular instance, but it is in truth a problem whose solution we well may dread, how far the souls that have perished round us may not rise up in judgment against us at the last for the doom which, but for supineness and easy selfishness, we might perhaps have averted. Ernestine could not, however, long endure the thoughts that pierced her heart; they

goaded her to immediate action. Annie Brook at least still lived, and find her she must, though all her own life were spent in the search. She concluded that the girl would return to Greyburgh, and she determined to seek her there without an hour's delay. She knew that her doing so would be even more violently opposed by her aunt than on the former occasion, for Mrs. Tompson's account of her proceedings there had been by no means palatable to that lady, and therefore she resolved to start before Lady Beaufort's return home; while much as she would have wished to have seen Lingard before leaving him for an indefinite period, she dreaded, if she stayed to tell him of her plans, meeting the look of sadness in the eyes which followed her so lovingly wherever she went. She knew that he would not oppose any wish of hers, however much he might regret her departure, so she decided to leave a letter for him, without waiting for the hour of his daily visit.

In a short time, therefore, Ernestine was in the train, taking with her only her maid; but from the station she telegraphed to Mrs. Berry, the nurse who had attended Reginald in his last illness, and told her to take lodgings for her, as she did not wish to go to an hotel alone. Poor Ernestine carried an aching heart

with her on her journey. It had cost her a bitter pang to break up her present happiness, and separate herself from her future husband, who seemed to grow each day more dear to her; and who in this changing life can ever part with a time of joy, without dreading that such another may never dawn for them again? The loss of Annie Brook, too, weighed heavily on her spirit: the search for her had been a bitter and a painful task, and if the poor girl had gone back to her evil life, it had all been worse than useless. Then, as the fair towers of Greyburgh came in sight, glistening in the evening sun, the remembrance of Reginald's unhappy death seemed to shroud it for her in sudden darkness, so fatal had this place, his so-called *Alma Mater*, been to him.

It was a comfort to see at the station, the kind motherly face of Mrs. Berry, who was waiting to conduct her to her lodgings, but even she had her tale of sadness on this occasion. The good woman was, as she expressed it, very 'down-hearted.' She had strained herself in the last case of illness she had attended, and was for the present, and probably for the rest of her life, incapacitated from continuing her employment as sick-nurse. As it was all she had to depend on for a livelihood, this was a serious calamity for her, and her delight and gratitude knew no bounds when Ernestine told her

she should remain with her till she was better, and that she would find means to make her useful in some light work. Ernestine's gentleness and sweetness had won on the nurse unspeakably during the time of Reginald's illness, and the idea of being with her or near her in any way was the greatest happiness she could have known. Having made Mrs. Berry happy was, however, the only gleam of comfort poor Ernestine had for the next few days. Her first thought was to take counsel with Thorold as to the best means of once more finding Annie, but to her dismay she heard from Mrs. Berry that he was in London, having undertaken a six weeks' duty for an overworked perpetual curate, in one of the most crowded districts. Mrs. Berry affirmed that he had done this solely that he might 'work himself a bit harder' than he could do in Greyburgh just at present, when all the schools had holidays, and most of the people of the poorest class were out at work in the fields. He was not to return for some time, so Ernestine's next resource was to go to the old gaoler for advice, and early next morning she was once more at the gaol. Bolton was very glad to see her, but he shook his head when he heard her errand.

'It's a cruel pity they could not keep her when they had got her, for I doubt you'll not soon set eyes on her

again. They should have coaxed her a bit. Rosie Brown would do anything on earth for a kind word, but she was scared in a moment if you were anyways harsh to her. However, she's gone, and the job now is to find her, and that won't be easy. She'd never come back here, you may depend. She'd be too much afraid of being took up and sent back to the 'tentiary.'

'But where can she be then?'

'Most likely in London; she was nearer there than here, and it's where most of them makes their way to sooner or later.'

'London!' Ernestine's heart sank within her. How hopeless any search would be in London she knew well. 'Oh, I must hope she is here,' she said; 'is there no way of finding out?'

'Oh, I'll find out for you right enough,' said the gaoler; 'Rosie's known now, and I'll send one of our police to look for her. He is as 'cute a chap as you'd wish to see, and he'll soon find out if she is in Greyburgh. If you'll come round here to-morrow, Miss Courtenay, I'll undertake to tell you whether she's in this town or no.'

There was nothing to be done but to wait through the dreary day, and dreary enough it was to poor Ernestine. She went to look at Reginald's grave, on which the grass was already green. Truly his place

knew him no more ; his name was but a memory, his life as a tale that is told. But where was the deathless soul, that had shivered so long in its darkness, without hope or stay, on the brink of the eternity that held him now ? As she thought upon him her whole heart rose up in one earnest supplication, that even yet the love of Christ, higher than the highest heaven, and deeper than the deepest hell, might reach him wheresoever he might be,—and therein she obeyed the irresistible instinct which burns in the heart of every one, be their creed what it may, who have seen their beloved pass into the mystery of the unseen life.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. DORRELL.

ERNESTINE COURTENAY was at the prison next day before the appointed time, in her anxiety to know the result of the policeman's search. The consequence of her early arrival was, that she found Mr. Bolton performing some occult ceremonies as the conclusion to his toilette, which it seemed always took place in the sitting-room, and during which Mrs. Bolton ministered to him with great assiduity. He was in no wise disconcerted, however, by Ernestine's entrance, but seemed on the contrary to think his appearance rather imposing, as he sat with a huge napkin suspended round his neck. He had redeemed his promise of ascertaining whether Annie Brook were in the town or not, and had discovered that she positively was not in Greyburgh, and had not been there since the day she left it with a 'lady.' Ernestine sat in mute despair. What was she to do next?

'I doubt you'll have a tough job looking for her now,

Miss Courtenay,' said Bolton; 'but the policeman told me one thing which may help you: it's more than likely that some one at Mother Dorrell's knows where she is, for the postman delivered a letter there which had the post-mark of Layton.' This was the village where the Home was situated, and Ernestine caught eagerly at the chance it afforded of finding out where Annie had gone.

'Oh, how do you think I could induce them to tell me about her?'

'There's only one chance, and that is, if you choose to pay them down a good round sum for the information.'

'I will pay them anything they please,' exclaimed Ernestine.

'Bless me! don't you go for to tell them that,' said Bolton; 'they'd please to ruin you, if they could; it's a shame that a penny of honest money should ever get into their hands, let alone your giving them their choice of the quantity.'

'Well, do tell me how to proceed,' said Ernestine, rather impatiently. 'I only want to find the girl, and I don't care what it costs to learn where she is.'

'I don't say as you will be able to learn,' said Bolton gravely, 'and certainly not unless you are uncommon

sharp, for they'll do their best to deceive you for the sake of their trade in the long-run. But as the girl is positively not at Mother Dorrell's, it cannot make any real difference to her that you should know where she is; and if she finds she can't get your money otherwise, perhaps she may tell you.'

'Was the letter written to her?' asked Ernestine.

'No, it was to one of the gals, but the postman could not remember the name. It's Mother Dorrell you'll have to deal with, however. She's a regular tyrant among them, and she's sure to have read the letter before the girl got it. She would only let her have it if it contained what pleased her.'

'Then I suppose I had better go to her at once,' said Ernestine. The intense repugnance she felt to the idea of seeing this woman prompted her to nerve herself to the task without delay.

'I think it is your only chance, Miss Courtenay. You had better just offer her a sum down to tell you where the gal is; but you must make her understand she'll not get it unless you have proof positive that she's telling you the truth. She'll take you in if she can, you may depend.'

With this consolatory assurance Ernestine left the gaol to go at once on her errand. It was by far the

most painful effort she had yet made for Annie Brook. Her regret for what her sensitive conscience considered her neglect of her, made her feel as if she ought to rejoice in any pain which she could now endure for her sake ; but her whole being revolted at the thought of being brought in contact with the wretched woman, who was so infinitely more vile and guilty than the unhappy girls she harboured in her home. Ernestine took Mrs. Berry with her, feeling that she really could not approach this den of wickedness alone, and she was forcibly reminded of the governor's description of her probable reception on arriving there.

There was nothing externally to indicate that the house was otherwise than respectable, but she knocked a long time at the door before she was admitted, while the sound of a window closing rapidly showed that she had been reconnoitred from above. At last the door was opened, and the woman in widow's dress, whom she had been told to expect, appeared. Ernestine looked upon her face, and actually shivered with the intense repulsion it caused her, though it was not in the least the villanous sort of face she expected to see. The forehead was broad and high, surmounted by false braids, from under which a few white hairs straggled out ; the eyes were small, keen, and light in colour ;

the nose high and pinched; the lips so thin that they formed a mere snaky line across her face. Her complexion was a dead white, in spite of her being, as Ernestine was afterwards told, about the hardest drinker in Greyburgh, and her expression was one of extreme meekness and suavity. Yet, in some indefinable way, this face conveyed an impression of wickedness, treachery, and cruelty, far beyond what words can describe. Were it the account of some fictitious character which was being given, doubtless invention would have sought for some more marked features of evil in the outward aspect, to convey the idea of subtle malignant iniquity, which that white hypocritical face betrayed. But it is the face of a woman probably still living which has been described, and the simple truth has been told as to the impression it conveyed to those who looked on it. The subsequent acts of this wretched woman are also true, almost impossible as they may appear; unless voluntary witnesses have lied needlessly against her. Conquering the shrinking horror she felt, Ernestine said—

‘Mrs. Dorrell, I wish to speak to you for a few minutes on a matter about which I am anxious.’ The woman did not move out of the doorway. She dropped a slow profound curtsy, and, speaking in a soft, smooth

voice, with an accent and a choice of words which seemed far above her station, said, 'I think, madam, you must be mistaken ; I do not think you can have any business with me ; perhaps you wish to see the person next door.'

'No, it is yourself I wish to speak to. I think you can give me some information for which I am willing to pay highly.'

'Oh ! pray come in then, madam,' she said at once, and making way for Ernestine and Mrs. Berry to enter, she closed the door carefully behind her, and led the way into a small parlour, furnished in a gaudy style, with some prints on the wall, which were not of the most edifying description. Two little children, one almost an infant, sat huddled together in a corner. They looked haggard and wasted, and when Mrs. Dorrell came in they hid their faces as if in an agony of terror. Mrs. Berry had her eyes on them at once, and the look was instantly observed by the woman.

'Pretty dears,' she said ; 'I hope they will not disturb you, madam. They are the children of a young friend of mine, a most respectable married woman, who is unable at present to have them at home on account of her weak health. I am so doatingly fond of children, I was pleased to take care of them for her.'

‘They will not disturb me,’ said Ernestine, looking compassionately on the poor terrified children, whom Mrs. Berry was already coaxing to come near her. ‘Now, Mrs. Dorrell,’ she said, going straight to her subject, ‘I am anxious to know where a young girl is, known by the name of Rosie Brown. She lodged here at one time, but she is not in Greyburgh now. She has written, however, within the last two days, to some one in this house, and I will pay any one well who will bring me correct information as to where she is.’

‘Rosie Brown!’ said Mrs. Dorrell, putting on a reflective air. ‘Ah! I remember now—a poor, friendless young girl, whom I allowed to take shelter here for a few days until I should be able to find a situation for her. I grieve to say, madam, she turned out very worthless; in fact, so loose a character that I could not retain her in my respectable house. I was obliged to dismiss her. I regretted doing it, but I had my reputation to consider. The humblest among us, madam, prizes a good name.’

This was more than Ernestine could endure. ‘It is quite useless to speak to me in this way, Mrs. Dorrell. The point is, will you tell me where the girl is, or not?’

‘I think you mentioned a reward for the trouble of ascertaining?’ she said, in a cringing tone.

‘ I will give you five pounds at once, if you can bring me proof positive that your information is correct.’

The woman’s eyes glistened. ‘ Well, madam, I am sure I will gladly assist you in any work of charity. I will endeavour to ascertain where the girl is, and, if you will allow me to call upon you this evening, I will give you her correct address.’

‘ Can I not have it now ?’ asked Ernestine.

‘ Unfortunately I do not know it. You are mistaken in supposing any letter came to this house. I live here alone with these sweet children ; but I will endeavour to ascertain for you, though it will cost me no doubt some hours’ toil.’

Ernestine felt certain that the woman knew the address at the moment she spoke perfectly well ; but her smooth lying face was quite imperturbable, and feeling thankful to escape from so odious a presence, she hurriedly wrote down the address of her own lodging, and rose to go.

Mrs. Berry meanwhile had been fondling the two poor little children, and as she got up they clung to her with their puny hands, and seemed unwilling to let her go. Ernestine saw Mrs. Dorrell give them a look so vindictive, that she wished she could have carried away the unhappy infants then and there ; but she was learning daily more and more the bitter lesson, that we must

ever in this life walk amidst sorrow and pain we have no power to alleviate. As Ernestine came out into the little passage, she saw a door at the end of it partly open, and a young woman, who was standing behind it, looked eagerly round to catch a glimpse of her as she passed. Ernestine half-stopped, feeling convinced she had seen that handsome, mournful face before, though she could not recall it at first. The quick glance of recognition from the girl's dark eyes, however, reminded her that she was the one among the band of prisoners at the gaol who had whispered to her where Annie Brook really was, and whose name the gaoler had told her afterwards was Nellie Lewis. Before she had time to say a word, however, Mrs. Dorrell had detected the girl's presence, and pushed the door back upon her so violently, that Ernestine heard her give a cry as if hurt.

‘My servant girl, madam,’ said Mrs. Dorrell. ‘I am shocked at her impertinence to stand staring at you in that way.’

Ernestine felt it was in vain to contradict the woman's incessant lies, and she went out in silence. Mrs. Berry was still looking wistfully at the poor little children, who, at a glance from Mrs. Dorrell, had cowered down in their corner, and Ernestine and she had not walked many steps down the street when they heard a shriek

of pain from a childish voice in the house they had left.

‘ Oh, Miss Courtenay, that’s a wicked woman !’ said Mrs. Berry.

‘ Indeed, I am sure she is,’ said Ernestine. ‘ Whose children do you suppose them to be ?’

‘ Ah ! there’s little doubt what they are, poor babes. They are the children of some of these unfortunate girls, who pay Mrs. Dorrell for taking care of them ; but I’m sure she cruelly ill-uses them, and indeed I’ve heard that the children left in these houses always die.’

‘ For want of food and care, no doubt,’ said Ernestine.

Mrs. Berry looked as if she could have told more, but shrank from doing so. Presently, however, she said : ‘ It passes me to understand, Miss Courtenay, how it is that the people who make laws and govern the country can allow such places as Mrs. Dorrell’s to be kept openly in the town. They are perfect nests of wickedness, such as the heathen lands I have read about might be ashamed of ; and I am sure of this, they’re the ruin of thousands of souls, for they lure every young girl they can catch into them ; and many a one, if they’ve lost their character or their place anyhow, would turn and do better, if they had no such house as that to fly to.’

‘ I thought there was some law against them,’ said Ernestine, ‘ but it does not seem to be enforced.’

‘ Bless you ! it’s a law that’s of no sort of use,’ said Mrs. Berry. ‘ It’s just this : If any of the neighbours chooses to go and accuse such people as Mrs. Dorrell of keeping a riotous house that’s a nuisance to the street, some notice would be taken of it, but there’s not one would dare to do such a thing. It would be as much as their life’s worth. It’s the police should have the power to go and rout them out ; and it’s just a mystery to me why they, or the magistrates, or some one don’t take it in hand.’

This is no less a mystery to wiser people than good Mrs. Berry. These houses are notorious, carried on openly in the face of day ; and how is it that in this Christian country they are allowed thus to exist untouched, poisoning the whole community with the propagation of the deadliest evil ?

Ernestine could give no solution to a question which seemed to her inexplicable ; and she asked Mrs. Berry if she thought it likely Mrs. Dorrell would really tell her where Annie Brook was to be found.

‘ I am sure she won’t tell you the truth if she can help it, Miss Courtenay. These wretches always consider it a loss to their trade when a girl goes into a

Penitentiary. But if she can't get your money otherwise, perhaps she will.'

It was just what the gaoler said, and Ernestine waited impatiently for nine o'clock, the hour fixed by Mrs. Dorrell for her visit. It was then almost dark, and punctually to the time the woman's knock was heard at the door. She came stealing into the room with a noiseless step. Ernestine was alone; and she bade her sit down, and asked eagerly if she could now tell her where Rosie Brown was.

'Yes, madam, I am happy to say I have been successful in my search, on which I have been employed all day, and I feel much exhausted. Madam, my strength is not what it was.'

Ernestine did not in the least understand that this was a hint for the offer of a glass of spirits, and if she had, she would not have given it, so she only said somewhat impatiently, 'Let me have the address, then.'

'I will, madam. Of course, I know I can depend upon receiving the reward so soon as it is in your possession?'

'Provided there is sufficient proof that you are giving me correct information.'

'I am grieved that you should doubt me, madam; but you will see that there is no occasion. Here is the address; and she read it from a piece of paper: 'Rosie

Brown, or, more properly, Annie Brook, is at the house of Matthew Brook, lodge-keeper to Lord Carleton, Carleton Park, Garsley.'

Ernestine started in extreme surprise. That was unquestionably the address of Annie's father, and no invention of Mrs. Dorrell's. Nor was it at all unlikely that Annie had longed to return to her father when she left the Penitentiary. Ernestine felt sure that she hated her former life, and that her position at Mrs. Dorrell's had really been one of galling bondage, to which she would not now be willing to return if she could find a shelter anywhere else. She had dreaded the confinement and discipline of the Penitentiary, and had proved unable to bear it; and therefore Ernestine did not look on her escape from it as any proof that she wished to return to her evil ways. If, indeed, she desired to lead a better life, her father's house was the most natural place to which she could go; but it did astonish her that she should have attempted it, knowing how completely he had disowned her. It was possible, however, that she had made a desperate venture, and gone actually to his door, in the hope that he would not turn her away; and it was also possible that he might take some steps to place her in safety, even if he dared not himself brave Lady Carleton's anger, by re-

ceiving her into his house. In any case, the address was a true one; and therefore Mrs. Dorrell was entitled to her reward, which Ernestine forthwith gave her. She naturally expected the woman to go so soon as she had received the money, and certainly she did not desire to breathe the same air with her a moment longer than was necessary; but Mrs. Dorrell lingered, evidently for some set purpose of her own, although she talked of nothing more important than the weather and the crops. Out of patience at last, Ernestine rose and called Mrs. Berry to show her out; but even then she remained in the passage, endeavouring to keep up a conversation with the good old nurse, who gave her the sulkiest of answers, and tried several times to get her out at the door in vain. At length, however, the clock struck ten; and then, as if she had been only waiting for this, she instantly left the house and hastened away.

Ernestine at once sat down and wrote to Matthew Brook, begging him to let her know where Annie was, and saying everything she thought likely to soften him towards the poor forlorn child. She thought it best to wait for the answer in Greyburgh; in case Annie, repulsed from her home, might yet return there.

In the course of the next afternoon, Ernestine was sitting in her room, writing her daily letter to Hugh

Lingard, when Mrs. Berry, who had been out on some business of her own, burst in, in a state of the greatest agitation, her eyes full of tears, and her hands trembling—‘O Miss Courtenay! such a dreadful thing has happened; it makes my flesh creep, it do! Poor little dears! Only to think—it is too shocking!’

‘What do you mean, dear Mrs. Berry?’ said Ernestine, unable to comprehend these incoherent expressions. Mrs. Berry’s only answer was to sit down and cry. ‘Do tell me,’ said Ernestine, taking her hand soothingly. With an effort, the good old woman composed herself and said, drying her eyes: ‘It is these two poor little children we saw at Mrs. Dorrell’s yesterday, ma’am; they were burnt alive in their beds last night.’

‘Burnt! Do you mean that they are dead?’

‘Indeed they are, ma’am; quite dead. They had an inquest on them this forenoon; and I saw one of the jury; he told me all about it.’ Ernestine sat down, trembling from head to foot. A horror for which she could hardly account took possession of her.

‘Tell me the particulars, Mrs. Berry,’ she said.

‘Ma’am, I am afraid it will shock you very much; but it was while that vile woman was here that it happened. She said in her evidence that she was here from nine o’clock to ten; that she could bring

you and me as witnesses of it ; that she left them alive, and came back to find them dead.'

'Did she mean that it happened in consequence of her having left them to come here?' said Ernestine, growing very pale.

'That's what she says, ma'am ; but it seems a strange story altogether. She says she put them to bed before she went, and that the eldest of them must have got up and taken the matches off the mantel-shelf to play with, and so set fire to the bed.'

'How was it the house did not take fire if the bed was burnt?' said Ernestine.

'It was only a straw mattress laid on the middle of the stone floor in the back kitchen, and there was no other furniture in the room at all, so when the mattress burnt out the fire died away ; but it killed the children first, poor little lambs !'

'But they must have screamed, poor things !—did no one hear them?'

'There was only one of the girls at home, at the back part of the house. She did hear them, and went to the door, but it was locked, and she could not get in ; and the poor innocents did not cry long ; I daresay they were soon dead !' and Mrs. Berry's tears began to flow again.

‘It is the most dreadful thing I ever heard of,’ said Ernestine, with quivering lips. ‘What was the verdict of the coroner’s jury?’

‘Accidental death, ma’am; but I think it’s a dark business altogether. I can’t abide the looks of that woman, and it seems strange her making so much of being here with you; and as to the poor little thing getting up to fetch matches, I believe he was too scared to have moved an inch from where she put him.’

‘Then how do you suppose it happened, Mrs. Berry?’ said Ernestine.

Before she could answer there was a hurried knock at the outer door; presently the servant came to say that a young person wished to speak to Miss Courtenay; and forthwith ushered in a tall woman, somewhat gaudily dressed, but with a thick black veil over her face. Ernestine at once recognised the girl who had looked so wistfully at her the day before at Mrs. Dorrell’s.

‘May I speak with you alone, ma’am?’ she said, in a low voice.

‘Certainly,’ said Ernestine; and Mrs. Berry, taking the hint, left the room. The girl threw back her veil, and showed a pale worn face, still singularly handsome, and eyes swollen with tears.

‘Ma’am, may I ask you to promise never to tell any

one what I am going to say ? I want to speak freely to you if I may.'

'Indeed you may,' said Ernestine, and never doubting that her visitor's confidence would be about herself alone she willingly gave the promise she asked. The girl thanked her, and then in a low sad tone went on : 'I wished to tell you, ma'am, first, that Mrs. Dorrell has deceived you about Rosie Brown : she is not at her father's.'

'Is it possible ?' said Ernestine. 'But how then could Mrs. Dorrell have known the address ? She was correct as to that.'

'She saw it in a letter Rosie had received when she was at home, and which Mrs. Dorrell took out of her box when she went to gaol. She made sure you would believe her, and give her the money, if she said Rosie had gone to her father ; and she boasted to us all how she had taken you in last night.'

'But where is the poor child then, can you tell me ?'

'Yes, ma'am, I can ; for the letter she wrote when she left the Penitentiary was to me. Mrs. Dorrell read it before she would let me have it ; but I got it at last. I brought it with me, that you might read it yourself, and see I have no wish to deceive you.'

'I am sure you have not,' said Ernestine, who was

much struck by the sorrowful, subdued manner in which the poor girl spoke. She anxiously took the letter, which was dated the day of Annie's flight from the Home, from whence she had probably taken the paper and envelope. It ran thus :—

‘DEAR NELL,—I write you these few lines to tell you that I have left the Penitentiary. You would hear Miss Courtenay took me there from the gaol. She was such a dear lady. I did love her. I tried to stay in that place to please her, for I knew she would grieve if I left ; but I could not bear it, not another day. I am going now to London to try and get work, for I won't do as I have done, never no more. I hate to think as ever I lived a gay life. You know I never was happy in it, and I would not go back to it now for all the world. I would go to that dear lady, if I were not afraid she would want me to go to a Penitentiary again, and I couldn't do that. So I must do the best I can. Surely in such a big place as London there will be some work for me. I write this to ask you, Nell, to take a letter out of my box, which was sent me when I was at home, and keep it safe for me ; for I am afraid Mrs. Dorrell will sell all my things when she finds I don't mean to come back, and I don't want to lose that

letter. It is the last my sister Lois ever wrote to me ; and she's dead now—poor Lois ! I often wish I were dead too. So no more at present from your friend,

‘ ROSIE BROWN.’

‘ But there is no address given here,’ said Ernestine in alarm. ‘ She only says she is going to London. Do you know no more than this ?’

‘ No, ma'am ; I only had that one letter, and I know nothing of her but what she tells me in it.’

‘ She must have written it immediately on leaving the Home, and posted it at the village, for I see it has that post-mark ; and then I suppose she went on to London. But how shall I ever find her there ? Poor Annie, I fear she is lost to me indeed,’ and tears rose to Ernestine's eyes as she spoke. The girl was gazing intently at her, and as she saw how deeply she felt for Annie, her chest heaved with strong emotion. She pressed her hands tightly together in the effort to control her agitation, and at last exclaimed, the words bursting from her lips with a sob—

‘ O ma'am ! if you can feel so much for Rosie, will you not show a little pity too for me ?’

‘ Indeed I will,’ said Ernestine, rising from her seat and coming to sit down beside her. ‘ I should not have

let you go till I had found out if I could help you in any way. Tell me what I can do for you. Your name is Nellie Lewis, is it not ?'

'Ellen Lucas is my real name,' and then, looking up imploringly, she said, 'O ma'am, I want to leave this wicked life. I've always hated it from first to last. I would have left it long ago if there had been any way of doing so except by going to a Penitentiary ; but the girls all advised me not to think of that, in such a way that I was frightened at the thought of it ; and if only you would help me out of it now, ma'am, I could never thank you enough. I think I'd rather die than go back to Mrs. Dorrell's after what happened last night.'

'You mean the accident to the two poor little children ?'

'It was not an accident,' she answered, with a shudder.

'Not an accident ! What do you mean ?'

'Ma'am, you promised me you would tell no one what I had to say,' said Ellen, lifting her dark eyes to her face. 'I may be quite sure you will not, may I ?'

'Certainly,' said Ernestine ; 'I have promised, and that is enough.'

'Then it will seem a comfort to tell you what I know, ma'am ; for I can get no rest for thinking of it, and it would be as much as my life is worth, I'm sure, to tell

it to any one else, in case it got round to Mrs. Dorrell's ears. These poor children, ma'am,' she continued, lowering her voice, 'were not burnt by accident; they were murdered!'

Ernestine almost shrieked with horror. 'Oh! can this be true?'

'It is too true, ma'am. The girls whose children they were, had gone off to Aldershot when the long vacation began, and never paid Mrs. Dorrell for keeping them all that time. I don't suppose they cared what became of the poor babies; for most of them know Mrs. Dorrell always puts away the children that are not paid for,—though I never knew it till last night.'

'Puts them away?' said Ernestine, not understanding.

'Puts them to death, ma'am! Polly Smith, who is almost an old woman now, and has lived half her life between Mrs. Dorrell's and the gaol, said she knew she had got rid of several since she had been there. She had mostly smothered them, and then dropped them into the canal, with a stone round their neck, in the middle of the night. But the body of the last one floated, and she was afraid of being found out, so Polly said she thought she had hit on a clever dodge last night, because she could call on your servants to prove she had been with you at the time of their death. So

she laid them down on a straw mattress, on the stone floor of the kitchen, and made a hole in it, and put two or three lighted matches in, and then she went out, and locked the door, and came off to you. She stayed out a whole hour, to make sure they should be dead when she came back ; and so they were, poor dears, sure enough.'

Ernestine grew so faint at this horrible account, that it was some minutes before she recovered herself sufficiently to speak. 'Did no one try to save them?' she gasped out at last.

'There was no one at home but Polly Smith. Mrs. Dorrell took good care all the rest should be out; and Polly has helped her to put the others in the water before now. But she told me when she heard the screams last night it did make her flesh creep; for burning seemed worse than anything, and she did go to the door and try to open it, but she could not.'

'Oh, why did she not go for the police, or get some neighbour to burst the door open?'

'O ma'am!' exclaimed Ellen, almost trembling at the idea, 'she would not have dared to do that for fear of Mrs. Dorrell. I would not have any one but you know what I've told you for all the world. It would do no good to tell it; for it could not be proved against her. Polly was the only one who knew anything about

it, and she would swear just as Mrs. Dorrell pleased. She said this morning at the inquest it was all an accident, for she knew there were no matches near the children, and they must have got up and taken them to play with. The jury quite believed her.'

'Were you called as a witness?'

'No, ma'am; I had been out of the house some hours before it happened, and I knew nothing of it till this morning, when Polly told me, and then I felt that, come what would, I could not stay in that house another day. I thought I would come and ask you to take me away, and that if you would not I would go and lie down in some lonely place and die; for I can't bear it any longer—I can't,' and she burst into a passion of tears; 'it's like being in hell to be in the midst of all that wickedness, and to feel that I am lost for ever!'

'Not for ever,' said Ernestine compassionately; 'the deep mercy of our Saviour never fails. I will help you with all my heart. You do not look to me like one who could ever willingly have entered on such a life.'

'Willingly! O ma'am, if you knew all,—how I was driven to it, and how wretched I've been times and times. I would have made away with myself, only I was afraid of God. I did not dare to go before Him so

wicked as I have been. I have longed for some way to get out of my sin and misery, and I could find none. I was so lonely, without a friend in the world ; and when I saw you at the gaol, ma'am, and you let me touch your hand, and seemed so sweet and good, I felt just for a moment as if I were not quite alone on the earth, and that perhaps you'd help me ; but I never saw you more till yesterday, and then I seemed more lost than ever ; for Mrs. Dorrell threatened me so when you were gone, that if it had not been for this cruel murder, I don't think I should have had courage to come to you.'

'You need fear nothing now, my poor child,' said Ernestine ; 'but I hardly know how best to help you ; you seem to shrink from going to a Penitentiary ?'

'I do indeed, ma'am,' said Ellen, with a palpable shiver. 'I would rather go there than stay at Mrs. Dorrell's ; but oh ! if you would help me out of this life in any other way I should be so thankful. I don't care how hard I work, or what I do, just to get bread to eat. I have been used to service ; but I know I must not hope for that now,' and she hung her head down, as tears fell from her eyes.

'What sort of service were you in ?' said Ernestine.

'I was never but in one situation, ma'am ; and it was such a happy one ! I waited on a lady who was an

invalid, and could not leave her sofa ; but she was such a dear, good lady ; it was a pleasure to do anything for her ; and she was so kind to me. My father was a small farmer near where she lived, and he failed, and died of a broken heart when I was about sixteen. Mother had been dead a year, and I was left alone, without a friend or a penny in the world ; and this dear lady took me on trial, and soon taught me all her ways, and I lived three years with her, and was so happy. I used to read to her, and stay with her in the drawing-room most of the day, and she would often say I must never leave her as long as she lived ; and I never would, if it had not been for—' her sobs choked her for a moment.

‘ And how did you come to leave her ? ’ said Ernestine gently.

She had a nephew, young Lord Sedley, heir to a grand castle and estate not far from where his aunt lived, and he used to come and stay with her often. He was such a handsome, dashing gentleman, and had such a winning way with him,—and of course I often saw him ; for I was always with my lady, even when he was there, and he found plenty ways of seeing me alone. He would saunter into the garden with his cigar when my lady sent me to gather flowers, and he would come to the

room where I sat almost every evening after she was gone to bed. He was the master and I was the servant, and I could not tell him to go away, as I might with another. I should have told his aunt, I know, but she would hardly have believed anything against him; and then I loved him—I loved him,’ and again the passionate tears forced their way from her eyes. ‘At last the end of it all was that I saw nothing but misery and shame before me, and I waited till he came next time, in such an agony lest I should be found out, and told him, and he was so vexed and angry. It did seem so hard. I thought my heart would break when I found how he took it all. At last he said I was to tell his aunt I was ill, and wished to go and stay with a friend. I had no friend in all the world, ma’am; but I told the lie to my dear lady; for he taught me to lie; I had never done it before. Well, she was so kind, and let me go, and said I was to come back as soon as ever I could; and then he gave me money to go and take a lodging somewhere; and I came here because I knew he was at college, and I thought I should see him. But he never once came near me; and before my boy was born he had left Greyburgh for good, and never came back. I wrote to tell him of the baby’s birth, and he sent me a ten-pound note, with such a

cruel letter, asking how I dared write to him, and that I was never to presume to take such a liberty again, and that I was mad to suppose he was going to keep up any acquaintance with such an one as I was. He said he sent me some money now, and there was to be an end to it. When I got that letter I think I must have died, if it had not been for my baby. I lived quietly till the money was all spent, and then I tried to work for my living, but my character was gone, and no one would employ me. I was weak and ill, and half-broken-hearted, and had no strength to do rough field-work, or anything of that kind. Then I began to sell my clothes to get food for me and my boy, and they were soon all gone. If I had been alone, I think I would have tried to make up my mind to go to the workhouse then, but they would have separated me from my child, and I could not stand that; and besides, I could only have remained there a short time, and then they'd have passed me on to my own parish; and I never could have borne to go back to my native place as a workhouse pauper, and something worse. Well, ma'am, when both the baby and I were half-starved, I thought I would try to see him who had brought me to this misery; so I set off to walk to the beautiful place where he lived. It took me days and days, carrying the child, but at last

I got there ; and when I came to the gate, the lodge-keeper would not let me in. I told him I wanted to speak to the young lord, and he jeered at me, and said it was just likely he'd speak to such an one as I was ; and then, when I still persisted, he said if I chose to wait outside the gate, I could see him when he came home from his ride. So I sat down by the roadside and waited. Oh, Miss Courtenay, I wish I had died then ! I wish his horse's hoofs had kicked me to death ; it would have been better than to have been trampled on by the man who had ruined me, body and soul. I sat there, on that hot summer day, thirsty and weary, with the sun beating down on my head, and the baby lying asleep on my lap, till I felt ready to faint with fatigue and hunger ; and I thought if I could but get sight of his dear face again, it would be like new life. Then there came the clatter of horses swiftly towards me ; the sound of gay laughing and talking ; and in a moment more a large party swept past me, and cantered up to the gate. They stopped close to the place where I sat, and he was the last, with a beautiful young lady riding close by his side. I never saw her but that once, for a moment, and yet I remember her as distinctly as if she were standing before me now : her bright laughing face, and her pretty hat and feather, with her fair hair all in confu-

sion below it. I seem still to see the look, half shy, half saucy, that she turned on my lord. Somehow it stirred my blood, and made me forget to be prudent. I felt as if I must show I had a right to him—I, the mother of his child; and I walked straight up to him, put my hand on his horse's mane, and called him by his name. I said I had come to see him, as I had not heard from him, and I wanted help for his child. Oh, ma'am, if you had seen his face when he saw and heard me; it grew just like the face of a devil. He struck me with his riding-switch on the wrist to make me loose my hold, and he spurred his horse, so that the beast reared and threw me back against the bank. The young lady screamed, and I saw him stoop to her so tenderly, and bid her not be afraid; it was only an impudent beggar, he said; and he took her horse by the bridle and led him in at the gate, talking to her all the while, till her face grew bright again, and she looked up into his eyes with a smile and a blush. I saw it all, though my heart had stopped beating, and I felt like to die. I leant there against the bank, not knowing where I was, or what I was doing, till suddenly I saw him coming striding down the avenue on foot from the house. I felt nothing but terror then. I thought he was coming to kill me, and I would have run away, but my feet

failed under me. He came on and on through the gate and past me, making a sign to me to follow him ; and I dared not disobey, for he looked as if he were almost mad with fury and rage. He struck into a bypath, and, as soon as we were out of sight of the road, he turned round and took hold of me by the shoulder with such a grip that I screamed with the pain. "Be still, you devil," he said, and shook me, and then, when I cowered down, frightened to death, he poured out such a volley of oaths and abuse, that I thought I must be dreaming to think he was the same who once spoke to me all the loving words that worked my destruction. He asked me how I dared to come near him, and swore if ever I tried either to see him, or write to him again, he would have me put in gaol for a vagrant and impostor. All I could do was to gasp out that his child was starving, and I held it towards him ; but he pushed it back, so as nearly to knock it out of my arms ; and he laughed—yes, he laughed,—and asked if I expected him to believe it was his child. He called me the worst name, and said he knew it was all a trick to get money out of him ; but I had had too much already, and he would not give me a penny more than enough to take me out of the place. He pointed to the station, which was close at hand, and ordered me to go there at once,

and he would send some one to pay my fare, and see me off. I was too frightened and broken-hearted to resist ; so I said never a word, but crept away to the station, and presently the village policeman came after me, and took my ticket, and sent me away in the train, threatening me with all manner of things, if ever I came begging about the place again. I suppose my lord told him I was a common tramp. I never contradicted him. I did not care what any one thought ; and when I got back here, homeless and penniless, what could I do but go to Mother Dorrell's, to get food for myself and the child ? I suppose God wanted to punish me, for He soon took my baby ; it died ; and then it did not matter what happened. I was quite ready to be what my lord had called me. What did it signify ?'

A look of wild desperation was gradually wakening in Ellen's eyes as she spoke, and she began nervously drawing her cloak around her, as if she were about to rise and go away ; but Ernestine took her hand--

'It has been dreadful for you, my poor child, and that man was very cruel ; but you see God has not forgotten you. He has sent me to help you, and now I am going to take care of you. You shall never go back to that life of sin and wretchedness any more.'

The sweet, kind words fell on the wretched woman's

heart like soft summer raindrops on the parched ground. She clasped the soft hand she held in both of hers, and burst into tears.

Ernestine whispered to her to remain quiet for a few minutes, and she would return to her; and then went to confer with Mrs. Berry as to a plan she had already conceived on behalf of this unhappy girl.

She had promised Mrs. Berry that she would give her a home, at least until her health were somewhat restored; and the idea at once suggested itself, that she might take a small house for the nurse somewhere in the suburbs of London, and establish her in it, on condition that she received Ellen Lucas as an inmate, and undertook the care of her; and that in the event of Annie Brook being found, she would afford her an asylum also. There was an additional advantage in the plan, that Ellen would find ample employment in nursing Mrs. Berry, who required constant attendance; and the occupation of soothing the sufferings of another, was calculated more than anything to soften and humanize her, after the dreadful demoralization she had undergone.

This plan approved itself to Mrs. Berry most entirely. She was an honest, conscientious woman, and was very unwilling to be dependent on Miss Courtenay,

without giving her services in return, which, in her enfeebled state, was not an easy matter; but she felt that by affording an asylum to those unhappy girls, she would be really of essential use to her, while her own kind-hearted wish to help these, the most wretched and forlorn of human beings, would likewise be gratified.

She therefore eagerly undertook to do all Ernestine wished, and told her, to the lady's great delight, that she could provide a home for Ellen Lucas that very night, as she had a sister living in London who would, she knew, gladly take them both in till she could find a house for herself. It was at once settled, therefore, that they should go up to town by the next train; and as Ernestine had now no motive for remaining in Greyburgh, beyond receiving Matthew Brook's answer, which could be forwarded to her, she herself followed that same evening. She arrived in London to find her aunt, Lady Beaufort, 'in a state of high displeasure' at what she termed her extraordinary proceedings; for which *désagrément*, however, the warmth and tenderness of Hugh Lingard's welcome amply compensated.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LOST FOUND.

ERNESTINE had the comfort of feeling that her journey to Greyburgh, though unavailing so far as Annie was concerned, had not been in vain, since it had resulted in the rescue of Ellen Lucas; yet a strange depression hung about her after her return to London, for which, she felt, her anxiety about the lost girl was not sufficient to account. The deeper revelation of evil which these last events had brought to her filled her with an indescribable terror of this world's wickedness, which had its rise in the strong spiritual instinct, common to all human beings, though in the great majority of them it is stifled and obscured till it becomes almost non-existent—that instinct which gives intuitive knowledge of the great truth, that in the perfection of God alone the immortal soul can find its real joy, its one repose, its ultimate and eternal satisfaction; and, forasmuch as union with Him in His infinite holiness is the aim and end of our being, it follows that in proportion as a soul recog-

nises this its true destiny, the more it will shrink from the antagonistic principle of evil, and cling to such faint reflections of the Infinite Goodness as may be found in the creatures once made in their Creator's image. Faith, and Truth, and Love were all deepening in Ernestine's soul at this time day by day, for in seeking Christ's lost little one she had found at every step the sinless Christ Himself; she shrunk with ever increasing sensitiveness from evil external to herself, and struggled more and more vehemently with that which lurked in her own being, her whole spirit going out in ardent love and longing to the only Holy, whom she recognised as her true and eternal Life, while the human affections, which shared in her growing sanctification, strove anxiously to rest on the one human being, whom her short-sighted partiality endowed with so bright a ray from the Divine Perfection.

Ernestine believed with all a woman's blind, unreasoning faith, in Hugh Lingard's goodness. She was aware at the time of her first engagement to him that such views on religion as he possessed were more negative than positive, but she knew nothing then of the immutable principle which a deeper knowledge of life was rapidly teaching her, that true virtue can have no existence except on a foundation of dogmatic truth

Now, when all things pertaining to the kingdom of God were ever looming larger and more distinct upon her view, she grasped at the hope that Lingard was also awakening to the realities of a more clearly defined creed, and that the tender reverence he showed to her, the consideration with which he treated all her ideas, was the result of his adoption of her faith, and not of his love to herself; and so it came to pass that the nearer insight into the hidden depths that underlie the surface of society, which had filled her with such horror and dismay, drove her to fling herself, so far as this world was concerned, far more entirely than ever before upon the love of Hugh Lingard, and on the tie which bound her to him.

Thoughts of this description had been stirring in her mind one morning, as she sat on a low seat at his side, while he showed her some plans for the improvement of the old manor-house he had inherited from his impoverished father, without an acre of land to render the place of any value. When they had fully discussed the plans, and laid them aside, Ernestine leant her head on the arm of his chair, with a wistful sigh.

‘Do you know, Hugh, it makes me tremble to think what it would be to me to live in this terrible world, if I had not you. You cannot think how full of dread it

has grown for me since I have seen some of its dark realities, or how thankful I am to have you to rest on, safe and sure.'

'Dearest,' he said, 'I can only be rejoiced at anything which binds you more closely to me; but I trust it is not because you think well of me that you can find this comfort in me?'

'But it is because I do think well of you,' she answered, clinging to him. 'Oh, what would become of me if I did not? What a black, horrible wilderness this world would be to me if I were compelled to think of you as of some—cruel, degraded, selfish, mean! Oh, I could not bear it! I think I could not live; but, thank Heaven, it is not so. You are my own—noble, and good, and true—whom I may love as such to all eternity.'

'Ernestine, don't. I cannot bear it,' said Lingard, almost writhing in the soft clasp of her clinging hands. 'You do not know what you are saying. To you, I hope, I always shall be true and stainless; but I am not good—not better than others. Don't think it, child.'

'And now I love you better than ever after that speech,' said Ernestine, looking up laughingly; 'for of all things in the world a vain man is what I most despise; and you are only proving that you are not vain.'

No, it is of no use ; you shall not beat me out of my position. I must and will honour and admire as well as love you, even before the Church makes me vow to do so.' He bent down over her and kissed her hands, without speaking, and with the rapid change of expression so characteristic of her mobile countenance, the smile faded from her face, and her eyes filled with tears, as she said : ' I do not know how I could laugh about it, even for a moment, for it is a terrible thing to rest on the goodness of one human being so completely as I do on yours. If anything could ever obscure this faith in you, the whole world would grow dark for me—all earthly hope and joy would pass away for ever, and life become only a toilsome passage to the grave.'

' Ernestine, these are words which might terrify any man,' said Lingard gravely. ' I conclude then, that if you were to find me such an one as those of whom you heard at Greyburgh it would have this effect upon you ?'

' Can you doubt it ?' she said, crimsoning all over her fair face. ' But don't speak of such dreadful impossibilities. I should like to forget the very existence of such beings. There cannot surely be many like them in the world ?'

Lingard made no answer. He sat deep in thought for a few minutes, and then suddenly asked her why

so much time was necessary before their marriage could take place.

‘Your aunt talks of six weeks, even now, from this time, while it seems to me we have already waited needlessly long.’

‘But, you see, it is to be at Beaufort Court. My aunt will require a week or two after her arrival there before she can fill the house with guests, and we are still to be three weeks in town.’

‘It seems to me all very unnecessary,’ he said impatiently. ‘Why cannot we just go out to-morrow morning, and be married quietly in the nearest church, without all these senseless preliminaries? You would become quite as securely my wife in that plain black silk, as in all the white satin and lace Lady Beaufort no doubt means to heap upon you.’

‘That is very true,’ said Ernestine, laughing; ‘and there is nothing I should like better than a wedding of that description; but I am afraid you would find Aunt Beaufort rather impracticable on the subject.’

‘I suppose I should,’ he answered moodily, and the subject dropped.

About a fortnight after this conversation Ernestine came home one day from driving with her aunt, and found a letter waiting her, in a strange handwriting.

She opened it, and straightway uttered such a sudden exclamation that Lady Beaufort declared she had shaken her nerves for the remainder of the day. It was from the matron of one of the London workhouses, stating that a young woman had been brought in the night before by a policeman, who had found her lying near the door in a fainting-fit, which appeared to have been caused by want of food and exhaustion. She had gradually revived, and, having taken a little nourishment, had been able to speak ; but the doctor, who had seen her that morning, had pronounced her in a dying state, from fatal disease of the lungs and other organs, and said that the utmost care and attention could only prolong her life a few days. She had stated her name to be Rosie Brown, and when they asked her if she had any friend who ought to be made acquainted with her hopeless condition, she took from within her dress a paper on which Miss Courtenay's name and address were written, and begged them to send for her—in accordance with which request the matron now wrote.

Found once more ! dying indeed, but still found, so that a last effort might be made to bring the immortal soul to God, before it passed for ever from the world which had worked its cruel woe. Ernestine remembered having given Annie her address when she left

her at the Penitentiary, and she augured well of the feeling which had made the poor child wear this scrap of paper next her heart, even in the midst of all her wilful wanderings.

Without a moment's delay she sent for a hired conveyance, knowing that Lady Beaufort would not at all approve of her aristocratic carriage being used for the purposes contemplated by her, for it was her full intention, if it could be done without risk, to take Annie at once to Mrs. Berry's, where she could attend to her herself, and where also Thorold could visit her; as Mrs. Berry, firm in her allegiance, had managed to get a house in the district where he was working for the present. Ernestine took her maid with her, in case she might require help, and started at once. After a drive which seemed interminable, through streets and lanes such as she had never even imagined in their squalor and misery, she at length reached a dingy, dismal-looking building, which proved to be the workhouse in question. It struck Ernestine that the gaol she had thought so terrible at Greyburgh, was quite a cheerful residence compared to this, and certainly old Bolton contrasted favourably with the surly porter who now opened the door about two inches, and informed her that ladies were not allowed to see the paupers. He was about to

close it, when she hurriedly told him that she had come at the matron's request, and showed him the letter, which she had fortunately brought with her. He gruffly told her to wait, and went apparently to inquire the truth of her statement. When at last he came back and let her in, it was with the aggrieved look of a man who is being imposed upon.

Ernestine was shown into the matron's room, where she found that functionary sitting over a fire, in spite of the warm weather, and discussing some tea and buttered toast with remarkable gusto. It was with no good grace that she got up to show Ernestine the way to the sick ward.

'The young woman is dying,' she said; 'and I shouldn't have troubled for no one to come to see her, if the doctor hadn't said if she went off sudden to-day, and she unbeknown to any one, there might 'ave to be a 'quest; and these coroners and magistrates have got that bump-tious and interfering with the way we does for the paupers here, that we're obliged to make as much of these tramps as if they were worth their keep, which they ain't. Here's the ward, ma'am, and the nurse will show you the bed;' and pushing open the door of a narrow, dark, ill-ventilated room, she went back in all haste to her tea.

Ernestine went in, and stood for a moment, almost overcome with the close, disagreeable air of the ward. It was filled with beds on either side, and all were occupied by suffering women. Nearly every fatal disease was represented there, for the poor creatures had not come to this, the last home of despair, till the long lingering hopes which life could give in any shape had wholly died away. Cancer, dropsy, consumption, and many another malady were there, and, worse than all, insanity and idiocy had their place beside those whose physical sufferings were greatly aggravated by their presence. Stretched on small hard beds, under scanty covering, lay those helpless sufferers, and over all presided one wretched old woman, herself a pauper, dignified with the name of a nurse, and receiving, for what may simply be termed the non-discharge of her duties, a payment sufficient to enable her to procure surreptitiously the bottle of gin, which she thrust under the nearest bed when Ernestine came in, her flushed face and indistinct speech, however, implying that she had already been regaling to a considerable extent. She was bent nearly double with rheumatism, and walked with a stick, of which her unfortunate patients seemed to stand in great awe. Her expression was that

of habitual ill-temper, aggravated, no doubt, by the pain and weakness resulting from her malady, and which rendered her, independently of everything else, wholly unfit for her post.

‘Now, then,’ she exclaimed, in a harsh grating voice, knocking with her stick furiously on the floor, as the poor patients turned round to look at Ernestine, ‘now, then, what are you a-staring and a-gaping for like that? what business is it of yours who comes here: lie down, every one of you, or I’ll find a way to make you. What was you wanting, ma’am?’ she added, to Ernestine, with an attempt at civility, inspired by the hope that sundry shillings might be forthcoming from the pocket of so well-dressed a lady.

‘I have come to see Rosie Brown: where is she?’

‘Rosie Brown: don’t know such a name; there’s none such here.’

‘Yes, there is,’ said a miserable-looking woman, who, unable to lie down from her difficulty of breathing, and having nothing to support her back, was trying to rest her head against the wall; ‘she was brought in last night, but you didn’t notice her, nurse, you was so drowsy-like,’ she added tremulously, afraid of the nurse’s wrath, who had simply been dead drunk. ‘I don’t think you’ve seen her this morning, but I heard her tell

her name. That's her over there, ma'am,' she added, pointing to a distant bed.

'See if I don't stop your tea for this, you—.' We forbear to give the horrible oath with which the nurse closed her speech; and as the poor dying woman heard that her tea, her one little comfort, was to be taken away, tears rolled silently over her faded cheeks. She watched Ernestine, however, who with gentle step, that she might not disturb the sufferers, was making her way to the bed she had indicated; and the poor creature murmured to herself, 'I am glad I told her, for all I've lost my tea; for she'll bring a bit of comfort to that poor wench dying there, and she's younger nor I, and less used to rough it.'

Annie was lying with her head turned from the direction in which Ernestine was coming, and she did not hear or see her, so that she was able to stand and look at her for a few moments without being observed. It was Annie indeed, but changed to a degree that Ernestine could hardly have believed possible, in the course of the few weeks since she had escaped from the Penitentiary. She was wasted almost to a skeleton; her wan face, with its bloodless lips and sharpened features, speaking of terrible suffering from want and destitution. The only traces of her former beauty were the blue eyes,

looking preternaturally large from her excessive thinness, and the bright hair, far too profuse to be confined in the workhouse cap, flowing all in confusion over the hard pillow. She lay in a heap on the bed, the sharp outline of her limbs showing distinctly under the scanty covering, as if she had just been flung there by some rude hand, and was too exhausted to move from the position in which she had been placed. Her breathing was hurried and oppressed, and the burning spot on the cheek showed that she was parched with fever. 'Oh,' thought Ernestine, 'if her destroyer could but see the mournful wreck he has made!' Hearing a step, but not looking round, Annie feebly murmured, 'Some drink, please, some drink, for the love of heaven!'

'What can I give her to drink?' said Ernestine, turning round to the nurse, who had followed her.

'Hang me if I know,' said the woman; 'I've got nothing for her, not so much as for myself—worse luck. Here, give her this fine cold water,' she added, snatching up a mug of water that stood by the bedside of another patient, who looked wistfully after it.

'I will bring it to you again,' said Ernestine to the sufferer, 'if you will kindly let me have just a little for this poor girl;' and the patient, brightening into a smile, begged her to take it. She went back to Annie's bed-

side. As she came close to her the girl looked up, and, seeing who it was, uttered a stifled cry, and buried her face on the pillow. It was evident that the recollection of her ingratitude in leaving the Home where the lady had placed her made her afraid to meet her again. Ernestine stooped down and kissed her forehead. 'Annie, dear Annie,' she said, 'I am thankful to have found you again. I am so sorry for all you seem to have suffered.'

Then Annie lifted up her head, and looked with an intense gaze into Ernestine's face. As she met the pitying eyes looking down so lovingly upon her, she suddenly flung her wasted arms round Ernestine, and, laying her head on her breast, exclaimed, 'Oh, my dear lady, you are like an angel from heaven to me!' Then, with something of her old impulsiveness, even in the midst of her great weakness, she started from Ernestine's gentle hold, and said, 'Miss Courtenay, I have not done wrong since I saw you last,—indeed, indeed I have not. I could not stay at the Penitentiary, but I felt that I'd starve rather than do wrong, and I have starved, but I've not sinned. Oh, I hope you'll believe me!'

'I do believe you, Annie, my child: don't doubt it, and I am thankful for it. It was better to suffer, as I can see you have done, than to sin.'

‘I don’t know, I’m sure,’ said Annie wearily; ‘it was the one thought of you, and all you told me, kept me from it, but it has been an awful time. I tried to work and get an honest living when I came from the Penitentiary, but the whole world was turned against me: they could all see what I was, and no one would employ me; so I sold my clothes, bit by bit, for food, till I had nothing left but my gown, and I slept under the arches of the bridge at night, but the water looked so black and cold I could not drown myself, as Lois did. I got ill, and my cough was dreadful, and at last I fell down on the pavement, and I thought I was dying, and so I am, I suppose, and then there’s hell—’ Her voice, which had been growing feebler as she spoke, died away, and she sank back on the bed half-fainting. Ernestine bathed her face and hands with water, and slowly the dim blue eyes opened again, and a smile flickered over the wan face, but she did not speak, and lay seemingly quite content to hold Ernestine’s hand and look at her.

‘Has the doctor seen her to-day?’ asked Ernestine.

‘That he han’t,’ said the nurse; ‘where’s he to get the time to see folk every half-hour?’

‘He saw her last night when she was brought in,’ said an old woman in the next bed, ‘and he said she was a-dying, and it was no use doing anything.’

‘And the chaplain, has he been to visit her yet, or will he come to-day?’

‘Bless you, he’ll see her in his regular rounds; and her turn ain’t like to come for a week or two yet.’

Ernestine looked at Annie’s deathlike face, and thought of the answer made a few years ago by a Bishop’s chaplain to a prison official, who intimated to him that a condemned criminal awaiting his execution was desirous of receiving the rite of confirmation: ‘His Lordship would make his biennial confirmation tour in the course of a year and a half, and would be happy then to receive any candidates who might be presented to him.’

‘She is very low and faint,’ said Ernestine, feeling the poor girl’s scarcely perceptible pulse. ‘What nourishment has she had?’

‘The doctor gave her some beef-tea hisself last night,’ said the old woman in the next bed; ‘and she han’t had nothing since.’

‘She ought to have something immediately,’ exclaimed Ernestine, much shocked at the neglect, which in this case was likely to be fatal.

‘Oh, it’s all very fine to say ought this and ought that,’ said the nurse; ‘but she can’t have anything if there is nothing to have. We keeps regular hours here

and it ain't dinner-time now, nor yet supper-time. She'll have her rations with the rest when the proper hour comes.'

To leave Annie in this place was certainly not to be thought of, and Ernestine determined to lose no time in taking her away.

'I shall take this patient home,' she said to the nurse. 'Do you know if there is anything to prevent my doing so?'

'Nothing at all as I knows on. A good riddance, I should say. Leastways, not unless the doctor were to say it would kill her to move her.'

'Can I hear what he says now, then?' said Ernestine. 'Is he in the house?'

'Sure to be at this hour; for it's his time for going through the men's ward.'

'Would you be so kind as to go and ask him, then?'

said Ernestine, putting some money into the nurse's hand; 'and if he does not object to my removing her, will you tell the matron I shall do so at once?'

The old woman hobbled off willingly enough after the receipt of such a gratuity; and Ernestine went to tell her maid, who was waiting at the door, to go to the nearest shop, and buy some blankets to wrap round the dying girl. As she came back through the room,

the poor woman who had pointed out Annie's bed to her, said, in a sad voice—

‘Be you a-going to take her away, ma’am? It’s a blessed thing for her, poor wench; but I wish I was a-going too.’

‘And so do I, and so do I,’ was echoed from all the beds near her.

‘I am sure I wish I could take you all away,’ said Ernestine, looking sorrowfully round on the forlorn faces which met her on every side. ‘I wish indeed I could help you in any way; but I do not know how. I fear it is against the rules to give money.’

‘Ah, that it is,’ said the woman; ‘and it would be no use, for they never let us keep it. That nurse would find it out, I do believe, if we hid it in our coffins.’

‘I am very sorry for you all,’ said Ernestine; ‘and I will try if I can get leave to come and visit you, and bring you some little comforts. I will do all I can.’

‘God bless you,’ resounded on all sides, and the poor woman said gratefully, ‘You have done something for us already, ma’am, for you have given us kind words; and that’s what we don’t get many days in the year.’ She heard the nurse’s step, and shrunk back.

‘The doctor says you may take her and welcome,’ said the old woman as she came in. ‘She’s got to die

anyhow, he says, and it won't make a bit of difference what you do with her. And the matron, she says you can please yourself; but she's very particular engaged just now, and can't be disturbed. She's engaged a-having of her tea,' continued the nurse savagely, 'a-frying her bacon, and a-bolting on it like anything. It is a shame, it is, she as has nothing to do but to sit with her hands across like a fine lady, feeding on the best; and me, that am toiling and moiling among them worrying sick folk all the day long, getting nothing much better nor the pauper's rations;' and so she went grumbling on, till Ernestine stopped her to ask if she could get one of the men to carry poor Annie down stairs to the carriage. This she did for a further 'consideration,' and the blankets having been brought, Annie was borne through the midst of her fellow-sufferers, who looked wistfully after her, and placed in the carriage, which was ordered to drive at once to Mrs. Berry's.

Annie lay half insensible in Ernestine's arms the whole way; but she opened her eyes and smiled faintly at the cry of passionate delight with which Ellen Lucas recognised her, as she was carried into the house.

'Oh, I am so glad Annie's found, and safe with me in this happy home. You will let me nurse her, Miss Courtenay, won't you?'

‘Gladly,’ said Ernestine, smiling. ‘You and Mrs. Berry together will, I know, take good care of her.’

‘That we will, poor lamb,’ said Mrs. Berry, looking compassionately on the wasted form that lay in the coachman’s arms, with the face of marble whiteness, and the long bright hair streaming over his rough coat-sleeve. And they certainly did their best for her. That evening, placed in a clean comfortable bed, after having a little soup and wine, Annie fell into so quiet a slumber that Ernestine was able to leave her without anxiety.

Next day, when the physician, whom Ernestine sent for, saw her, he said, that although the workhouse doctor had been quite right in saying the case was entirely hopeless, and the end very near, yet he thought the great care and good nursing she was likely to have, might prolong her life two or three weeks at least.

And so it proved. The frequent nourishment she took, and the perfect rest and quiet she enjoyed, enabled her to rally considerably, and a last little wave of life seemed to bear her up once more on the mortal shore, from which she was so soon to pass away, and be no more seen.

Ernestine was very thankful for this respite. Poor Annie’s earthly life had been so mercilessly blighted,

that it would indeed have been a mistaken compassion to have wished it ultimately prolonged; but she did desire earnestly that time might be given her to make her peace with God, in whom alone could be her true and eternal rest. This anxiety Thorold shared to the full; and he undertook, with his usual quiet energy, to do all he could for the dying girl. Ernestine wrote to Annie's father, to tell him of her hopeless state; and also, that it had been induced entirely by the sufferings she had endured, in consequence of her determination to keep from evil. In his reply he thanked Miss Courtenay heartily for all her kindness, and said the only comfort he could know about his wretched child, was the fact of her being saved from dying in the workhouse. He sent her his love and free forgiveness; but he said he could not bring himself to see her, and he felt sure it was happiest for them both not to meet; and as Annie shared in this opinion, Ernestine made no opposition to his decision.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

AND now commenced within that narrow room another phase of the awful and mysterious struggle, which, from the highest heaven, when angels fell from their first estate, in ages inconceivably remote, down to the feeblest child that this day wakes to personal consciousness, has still rent the universe with dreadful combat, dying into stillness by every open grave, but reproduced again at every human birth; and never ceasing where living breath is drawn, to make earth ghastly with the 'confused noise of battle, and garments rolled in blood.'

'There was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon fought, and his angels.' What affinity could there be between the stupendous scene of mystery and terror opened to us in these words, and the deathbed of that lost degraded child, seeming in her dishonour and weakness the most despicable and insignificant of God's creatures? Yet were they but links of the one great chain, whose

beginning and end are alike hid in the Omniscient hand,—the chain forged by the electric shock of the antagonistic principles of good and evil. What though in the one case it might be the destinies of the universe to all eternity which were involved, and in the other but one immortal soul which trembled in the balance of everlasting life or death?—who shall say which seemed most momentous in the impartial judgments of Perfection; for has not the Cross on Calvary taught us that the fate of a single soul could have moved the Throne of God Himself to the very centre, since He who became incarnate to save the human race, would have done no less had but one out of all their millions stood in risk of perishing!

The struggle in this instance was very fierce. The course it took in the deathless soul of this young girl, opened up strange vistas as to the far-spreading and indestructible consequences of one evil act, such as that of the man who had lured her to her ruin; and showed how, in the ages to come, it might live to meet him, in such forms of hideousness as would appal him in his hour of final judgment.

Annie Brook's mental state, when told by Thorold that her life's probation was wearing to its close, was simply one of entire despair; but it was a condition

which resulted not from her own sin, but from that of her betrayer. For her own guilt, dark and dreadful as it was, she knew that sacred blood had been shed, from a Heart so spotlessly pure that it had power to wash away even the black stain that defiled her soul; but she felt that, if he, who with words of sweetest promise had won her innocent love, had but left her as he found her, a safe and happy child in her father's home, she might even now have been traversing life with honour and affection round her, and blessed years in store, which the holy ties of wife and mother would fill with tranquil joy. She knew that he had deceived her with the cruellest deceit one human being can practise on another,—he, the experienced man of the world, she, the ignorant girl of sixteen. She knew that he had demanded, and by false words obtained, the sacrifice of her whole being for time and for eternity, in order to give himself a passing pleasure. And when he desired to rid himself of a burden which had lost its charm, he had consigned her to depths of guilt and degradation unknown to her before even by name; while he himself, whose words had ever been law to her, had told her that, because of what he had made her, no other resource but that remained to her in all the earth,—except a grave. He had told her this; he had lashed her with words

which stung like scourges of fire, till he had driven her on to set the seal on her infamy, and then turned away to enter on his fair honourable life again—his life of pleasure, sensual and intellectual, of refinement, of high ambition, of glowing hopes, and bright reality ;—and the thought of these things crushed hope and trust utterly out of her soul, and cursed her with the fatal conviction, that one doomed to such a fate could never have had a share in the love of God.

‘ If God loves sinners, I am too great a sinner for Him to love,’ she said ; ‘ if He had loved me He would have killed me when I stepped out of father’s house to go to my ruin. No ; it seems as if the one He loves is the man who has been my curse ; for I saw him, Mr. Thorold, I saw him, a few nights ago, driving to the theatre in a carriage, with some of his fine friends, looking so well and so handsome, laughing and talking, with livery-servants waiting on him, and the people making way to let him into the bright beautiful place, with its lights and its music. Yes, and he flung money to a beggar standing near ; and I, what do you think I was doing ? crouching on the wet pavement, soaked through and through, for it was pouring of rain, faint and like to die ; for not a bit had I had to eat that day, and with no other place to sleep that night but the stones at my

feet; and because I leant forward to look at the face I had loved too well, a policeman gave me a push that sent me reeling against a door-step, and then called me a bad name, and said none of my sort should stand among respectable folk; so I was frightened, and I turned into a dark court, where nobody would pass, and lay down on the stones for the night; and was I to lie there thinking God loved me and not rather him, who sat in the bright warm theatre listening to the music and taking his pleasure?’

It was not easy to convince an unreasoning and un-intellectual mind like Annie’s, that in the very fact of the success of the wicked, and the sufferings their sin inflicts often alike on the innocent and guilty, lies the strongest natural argument for the immortality of the soul and the future retribution of God, ‘the righteous Judge, strong and patient.’ In all ages, in all places, the human instinct has responded to this truth. David of old, in his grief and dismay at sight of the ungodly in such prosperity, exclaimed: ‘Then thought I to understand this, but it was too hard for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I the end of these men. Oh how suddenly do they consume away, perish, and come to a fearful end! Yea; even like as a dream when one awaketh.’ And from his day to the

present, the consideration of this great mystery of evil has led every honest mind to see, in the existence of these deep and hidden things of God, the certain promise that His immutable justice shall yet shine forth as the sun of all eternity in the death-day of the world ; when the clamorous instinct of right and wrong that cries aloud in every living soul, shall find perfect satisfaction in His most pure judgment, and His final adjustment of the moral creation.¹

Strongly as those arguments commend themselves to those whose reasoning powers have been cultivated, Thorold knew they would not be understood by Annie Brook ; but for her, as for all, there was one most potent and infallible proof, which lay open and glorious in its truth as the clear light of day in the face of heaven. In the charity that clothed the Immaculate God with the humility of the Incarnation, and won from Him voluntary endurance of death and sufferings, whose bitterness exceeded the world's accumulated woe, there is a revelation of the Divine Love which swallows up in its fullness and completeness all seeming mysteries of evil, and stamps with the seal of eternal tenderness, and the

¹ An able exposition of this argument will be found in a work entitled *Some Words for God*, under the heading IMMORTALITY (published by Messrs. Rivington, London).

promise of ultimate good, every incident in the life of individual souls, as in the history of the world at large. Whatever may be the darkness, and confusion, and injustice that seems to plunge the earth in chaos, none who have realized, so far as human comprehension may, the meaning of the awful '*It is finished*' which has echoed down the vanished ages to thrill in the heart of every one of us, can doubt that at the last, love, immaculate, illimitable, all-enduring, will be found the one governing principle that has ruled the world, and shall be the deathless life of man's eternity.

To awaken Annie Brook therefore to a perception of the love manifest on the Cross was the work to which Thorold now set himself with his whole might. How difficult a task it was, those only can know who have attempted to teach this simplest yet sublimest truth to an uneducated mind. Perhaps not one in a thousand of the lower orders does in reality discern the motive power which made the Son of God obedient unto death; they repeat by rote words which imply it, and they have a vague knowledge of the actual event of the crucifixion; but that they are to see in it not only an evidence of love, but of a love which is personal to themselves, and of the deepest moment to them, is what most of them go from the cradle to the grave without ever realizing.

Their teachers imagine that the words 'He died for me,' repeated by every Sunday-school child, prove their acquaintance with the glorious truth it involves, but there is in reality no idea connected with the sentence in their minds. The fact is that the religious teaching of the lower class is superficial and hollow to the last degree, and so it will continue to be, till the whole of their instruction is brought to bear on their realization of these two great truths—the Divinity of our Lord, and His personal and living interest in themselves.

Annie Brook had received what would be considered a good religious education for a girl of her rank. She knew most of the facts contained in the Pentateuch, and could repeat the names of the Patriarchs, and of some of the Kings of Israel and Judah ; and she knew also of the birth of One whom angels worshipped, and Herod sought to slay, and who at length was killed by wicked men, and yet arose the third day, and went up to heaven ; but to her it was all just a 'Bible story,' which had no more reality for her than the 'pretty tales,' as she expressed it, which her grandmother used to tell her by the winter hearth.

When at length Thorold brought her to realize the true meaning of the words she had so often repeated, 'He died for me,' it broke her down completely ; the

bold unbelief, the rebellious complaint, the angry cry of injustice, were stilled for ever, and replaced by the one weary passionate longing to find a shelter for evermore in the Divine compassion of that love, from which she feared she was too fatally shut out. Thorold taught her to trace the evidences of it even in her own past life. The care of her earthly father, type of the Heavenly, which would have shielded her from all evil had she not abandoned it ;—the very desertion of her destroyer, which else had let her sin remain too dear to be relinquished ;—the remembrance of her by Lois in her last dark hour ;—the pity which had tracked her steps from the first day that Ernestine received her mission from the dead ;—the providence which had discovered her to her true friend in her last extremity : all these tokens from God, shining like rays of light in the hideous darkness of her sinful past, now but woke in her a deeper pining for Him who can alone be perfect satisfaction to the undying soul ; and she implored of Thorold to teach her, the guilty wanderer, how she might seek the crucified Lord, and so feel after Him and find Him, that even she, like happy Magdalene, might yet rest her weary head beneath His blessed feet.

One less experienced than Thorold might have thought the work was done when so much was gained, but he too

surely presaged the next difficulty which would assail this victim of a fellow-creature. He told her she must forgive ere she could ask to be forgiven, and with a cry of passionate indignation she exclaimed it was impossible ! Thorold must know it was impossible for her to forgive the merciless betrayer who had made such havoc of her life and soul ; he was cruel to ask her ; and she writhed on her bed, and clenched her wasted hands convulsively, as if the very remembrance of this man ate into her heart like fire. It has been well said that the deepest hate is that which springs from a dead affection ; it was the bitterness of her outraged love which brought this frenzy on Annie Brook's feeble frame, and made her blue eyes, dim already with the shades of death, gleam with the impotent fury of some wild beast at bay.

Thorold waited till the paroxysm was spent, and then he began, in a low, sad voice, to speak of the inconceivable sufferings of the Passion, in all its awful details of insult, blasphemy, and torture. He spoke of the Perfect Innocence thus punished, the Perfect Love thus cruelly rewarded and betrayed, of the awful agonies, mocked by those for whom they were endured ; and as he went on with this history, which has broken harder hearts than Annie's, the angry fire died out of her eyes, her lip quivered with strong feeling ; and when at last he re-


mind her how, in return for all this brutal cruelty, this wanton pain and humiliation, the Divine Sufferer lifted up His dying voice and uttered that holiest prayer, with which He still pleads at God's right hand for the pardon of every living soul that, sinning, crucifies Him afresh, and puts Him to open shame, '*Father, forgive them,*'—she suddenly hid her face in her hands, while tears burst through the thin white fingers, and exclaimed—

'Oh, wicked, wretched that I am, what are all my sufferings, my injuries to His? And I say I will not forgive, while He forgave the cruel men that mocked and tortured Him. Blessed Jesus, I will, I do forgive him! Oh, pity and pardon us both!'

Again, it might have been thought that from this point, all would have been easy and peaceful in the progress of this departing soul; but there was yet another struggle almost inevitably before her, which Thorold well knew would prove harder than any other. The keen sense of the love and goodness of her Lord, which seemed at last to take possession of Annie's whole being, brought with it such an overwhelming conviction of her own sin, that a time came when she utterly despaired of any possible pardon for herself. That, after all the blessed Saviour had endured and done for her, she should have turned away from Him to give herself to the sins which

He abhorred, seemed to the heart-broken girl to place her beyond the pale of possible forgiveness. She made a full confession of all her guilt to Thorold. She prayed constantly that she might be allowed once again to see the man who had been her enemy, that she might forgive him in words as well as in heart; but still she could not lift her weeping eyes to heaven, and see aught but justice in the dreadful doom which she anticipated. She refused the Last Sacrament, which Thorold would not now have withheld from her, because she thought that to receive it would but increase her condemnation; and so she passed through some days and nights in an agony such as no earthly trial or sorrow could ever bring on a living soul. It was plain that, if it continued, it would soon consume the little life still left to her, and both Thorold and Ernestine were greatly concerned about her.

Ernestine spent every moment with her which she could spare from Lingard; but he seemed now as if he could not endure her to be absent from his sight; and the wistful tenderness with which his eyes followed when she left the room, often filled her with a strange sadness, which haunted her even at the deathbed of the dying girl. One evening there was a large dinner-party at Lady Beaufort's, and Lingard had come early that he might have a few minutes with Ernestine before the guests



arrived. They were alone in the drawing-room ; she was examining some lovely flowers in a vase near her, and he was watching the unconscious grace of her movements, and thinking that she was the very type of all that was gentle and pure and womanly, with her sweet thoughtful face, and soft brown hair, and the flowing white draperies that seemed to create a light around her, when a servant came in with a note for her. It was written in haste by Mrs. Berry, to say that Annie had suddenly become very much worse ; that, indeed, in the expressive phraseology of the nurse, she was ' taken for death.' The doctor had been sent for, and pronounced it impossible she could live through the night, and her exhaustion and breathlessness were so great that Mrs. Berry almost feared she would not last till Ernestine could reach her. The nurse had sent for Thorold, but he was out, and she had desired that he might be told of the girl's dying state immediately on his return. Finally, Mrs. Berry entreated Ernestine not to delay an instant in coming, for Annie was waiting her arrival with all the feverish anxiety of one whose moments were numbered. Ernestine put the note into Lingard's hand.

' I must go,' she exclaimed ; ' I will not wait, even to change my dress. You will explain my absence to my aunt, and make peace for me, will you not, dearest Hugh ?'

She had already rung the bell and ordered a cab, and desired that her maid should be sent with a shawl.

‘Must you go, darling?’ said Lingard, holding both her hands fast.

She looked up to him in surprise.

‘You see nurse says she is dying, and fears I can scarce be in time. I must not delay a moment.’

Still he would not lose his hold.

‘She may be dead before you get there,’ he said, ‘then your drive at this untoward hour will be useless.’

‘Oh, I hope not,’ exclaimed Ernestine, tears starting to her eyes. ‘I promised poor Annie to be with her at the last; you know she has not a friend in the world but me. Don’t hold me, dearest Hugh; there is Benson at the door with my shawl, and I grudge every moment.’

Still he held her.

‘I never was so unwilling to part with you in my life, Ernestine.’

‘But why, dearest?’ she said, looking at him anxiously. ‘I shall only be a few hours away from you, and soon we shall be always together, Hugh.’

‘Heaven grant it,’ he said, and for a moment clasped her passionately in his arms, then he let her go, and she hurried to the door. Her maid was standing on the

stair, ready to go with her, and with a thick shawl on her arm. Lingard took it from her, and wrapped it round Ernestine with the utmost care. Then he went down with her, and helped her into the carriage, holding her hand fast as he did so, and whispering, 'Come back soon, my darling, or I shall come and fetch you.'

She turned round her face and smiled at him,—a sweet, bright smile, which was never again to pass from his memory. Lingard returned to the house, with its lights and its flowers, its luxury and its aristocratic guests, while Ernestine, after a long drive through the dark streets, entered the little humble room where the fallen girl was dying in her shame,—a common sight enough in this land of Christian faith and vaunted civilisation, yet one—how awful and mysterious!—a deathless soul about to go forth into the dread unknown, with all the stains and wounds of its mortal life upon it, and with eternity rising up before it, dark in despair, because of the sin wherewith one human being had quenched the light of heaven on its path.

As Ernestine entered the room she stopped, almost startled at Annie's wonderful beauty, which at that moment far exceeded even the loveliness she must have possessed when her portrait was taken. It is often thus in the last hours of human existence. The poor people

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call it the 'lightening before death;' and those who have once seen the peculiar brilliancy of the eyes, and the intensely spiritualized expression of the countenance, during that last and brightest flash of life, can never forget it. Annie's breathing was so short and difficult that she could not lie down, and she was propped up in bed, her head supported by several cushions, that she might have as much air as possible. The delicate white of her complexion was relieved by the crimson tinge of fever in her cheeks; her blue eyes, wide open, and shining with unnatural light, flashed from side to side in unceasing restlessness; her wealth of fair hair lay scattered on the pillow round her, and as she gasped, with the heaving of her chest painfully evident, she clutched the bed-clothes convulsively, or pushed back the heavy curls from her face, and glanced round constantly with an eager famishing look, as if she were hungering for some new source of life. As her bright restless eyes fell on Ernestine, she held out her arms passionately, and exclaimed, in a voice pitched high with feverish excitement and exhaustion—

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, come to me, come and help me! What shall I do? Oh what shall I do? I am dying. I am going to see the face of Christ, and how shall I bear it? My sin, my sin; it has crucified Him again and again



—the Scripture says it ; crucified Him afresh, after the blood He shed, after all He suffered to save me—yes, me ! I turned my back on Him, and would have none of Him ; I wanted to do the things He hated. He offered me life, and I chose death ; He offered me heaven, and I chose hell. Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do ?’ and she clasped Ernestine’s hands in her convulsive agony, and gazed into her eyes as if she would have wrung some hope from her answer ; then, before Ernestine could speak, she had flung herself back again, and was staring upward, almost with a prophetic look.

‘ The face of Christ, shining as the sun in its strength ; Christ, who never sinned, the Judge of all the earth. And I to stand before Him with all my wickedness black upon me ! Mercy, mercy ; but there is no time ; the minutes are flying ; I am growing faint ; death is cold at my heart. Oh that I could live again ! Oh Lord, that I could live again. I can’t, I can’t ! My soul is lost ; yes, my wretched soul is lost !’ and, breathless, she sank back again. How impotent all human agency was in that hour ! Ernestine, trembling from head to foot, would have given worlds to have helped her ; but how ? She felt that it was in truth a soul alone with its God, struggling under an awful revelation of His purity and

its own iniquity, and that she at least was powerless in such a conflict.

‘Is there no chance of Mr. Thorold’s coming?’ she said, turning anxiously to Mrs. Berry, who was standing near, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

‘He’s sure to come, my dear lady, the moment he goes home and gets the message; but he’s out among the sick and poor somewhere, and no one can tell where to find him, or when he will be back.’

‘Well, you must not stay here, dear nurse, at all events,’ said Ernestine, who saw that the good woman was feeling faint and ill. ‘I shall not leave Annie now, and you must go and lie down. I will call you if I want you.’

‘I’ll go to poor Ellen, then, for she is wonderful timid at the thought of death in the house. She says she’s been such a sinner, it scares her; and she can’t bring herself to come near the room, for all she’s so fond of Annie.’

‘Yes, go and make her take care of you;’ but as she went to the door to close it after Mrs. Berry, Annie thought she was going away, and shrieked out—

‘Miss Courtenay, are you going to leave me to die alone, and go out before God with all my sins upon my head? Oh why won’t you help me? Don’t you see I am

dying ; and every wicked thing I've ever done is written on the wall there in letters all of fire ; and I'm obliged to see it ; I'm obliged to read it. I tell you it's dreadful. And then, there's the Lord Christ dying on His cross, and me flaunting past Him, laughing and mocking. What did I care ? I took my pleasure, and let Him suffer in vain for me. O Miss Courtenay, you have done your best for me ; but I'm lost, I'm lost !' Only exhaustion made her pause for a moment, but the restless glancing of her eyes never ceased for an instant, or the convulsive clenching of her hands. She was beginning to cry out again with her despairing words, but Ernestine forcibly took the trembling hands in hers, and compelled her to turn her glance on her.

'Annie, listen to me,' she said ; 'I have one word to say, which you must hear. Listen to me quietly now for a moment.' Annie's eyes rested on hers, and she saw that, for the time at least, she was giving her full attention, and slowly and solemnly Ernestine said— 'The Lord Jesus Christ declared, "I am come into the world to seek and to save that which was lost." Do you hear me, Annie ? He came to save that which was LOST.'

'Lost !' repeated Annie slowly. 'Lost ! and who so lost as I am ?' She remained silent a moment ; then

over the bright flashing eyes there gathered a mist of tears.

‘Oh, is it possible, that me, even me! so lost, He would seek and save?’ She drew her hands out of Ernestine’s grasp, and folded them together as she had been taught to do when a little child she repeated her evening prayers, and in a trembling voice she said—

‘Lord Jesus, I am lost indeed; O seek and save me, even me, Lord Jesus!’ Then she remained perfectly still, her eyes closed, and tears slowly coursing down her cheeks, now grown deadly pale. Ernestine remained kneeling at her side in perfect silence. At last Annie whispered softly—

‘Do you think the Lord Jesus would like to save me?’

‘I am sure he would, my child.’

‘But so bad as I have been?’

‘His love is greater even than your sin, Annie.’

Then there was silence again for a long time. The terrible restlessness was gone. The feverish flush had died away. The calm which often precedes death had set in; and, but for her laboured breathing, it would have seemed as if the struggle were already over, so like a marble statue did she seem, with her closed eyes

and her unearthly whiteness. Once only she spoke during this interval—

‘Do you think Mr. Thorold will come and give me the Sacrament now?’

‘I hope so, dear Annie; we have sent for him; he was out, but he will come the moment he gets the message.’

‘Too late!’ she said, with a quiet movement of the head. ‘He will be too late. But it is only just I should not have it now; I refused it so often.’

Then she relapsed into silence. So passed some hours. Sometimes Ernestine thought she slept; at other times her lips moved as if in prayer; but her breathing was growing perceptibly fainter, and it was plain that death was very near. Ernestine knelt, with her back to the door, looking sorrowfully on the white, sad face, and feeling as if she ought to be speaking some words of comfort to her: while at the same time she dared not break in upon a silence in which the departing soul might be listening to the very voice of God. Suddenly she saw Annie start as if she had received an electric shock. Her eyes opened wide, clear and bright as in her fairest days, and fixed themselves intently on the door, which had opened a moment previously, though Ernestine had been too much absorbed

to hear it. The powers of the girl's failing life seemed to rush over her sinking frame once more. She gazed towards that spot with a smile of ecstasy, and stretching out her arms, exclaimed—

‘ You are come ! Oh, God be praised, who has heard my prayer. You are come, that I may tell you I forgive you with all my heart, with all my soul, as I pray the dear Lord may forgive me too. Come to me ; come to me quick. I have but a moment, and I want to take back the bitter words I have said against you ; let us part in peace, though you wronged me so cruelly, who loved you so well.’

Ernestine was utterly astonished at this sudden outburst, and at the strange words Annie uttered, and for a moment she almost thought her delirious ; but it was evident from her look that she was indeed addressing some one actually present, and turning quickly round to see who it was, she gave a suppressed shriek, while her heart seemed to stop beating, and she felt as if turned to stone. It was Hugh Lingard who was standing there in the door-way, with a look of horror and dismay on his face such as no words could paint, while his eyes were fixed on the dying girl with unmistakable recognition ; his arms fell slowly to his sides, and the one word, ‘ Rosie !’ escaped involuntarily from his lips. In a moment

Ernestine saw it all. The truth flashed upon her soul in all its details, with that irresistible conviction which seems almost like an inspiration from heaven. She knew in that moment, with a terrible knowledge which could never pass away from her, that the destroyer of this child, whom God had sent her to seek throughout the world, was that very man who was dearer to her than life itself, and in whom her whole earthly happiness was bound up only too fatally. It was like the shock of an earthquake to her thus to learn that the truth and goodness, in which she had believed so fondly as being his special characteristic, had in fact never existed. Kneeling as she was, she had to catch hold of the bed to keep herself from falling, for there was a mist before her eyes, and a roaring as of thunder in her ears; but through it all, she caught the tones of Annie's voice, fainter far than before—

‘Oh, why will you not come to me? I am going fast. Why do you look at me so? Are you sorry I am dying? It is best. I could not live any more in this world. But come quick. I want to ask God to forgive you. I want to part friends. My breath is failing. Come.’

Her faltering words died away. Her breathing came in long gasps, and Ernestine, forcing herself to look up,

saw that an awful change was passing over her features. There was no time to be lost. No earthly thoughts or human feelings must stay the work of charity in that supreme moment. She rose up and went towards Lingard, who had staggered against the wall, and covered his face with his hands.

‘Is this true?’ she said, in her low sweet voice, which trembled as she spoke. ‘Is it indeed you who have need to ask her forgiveness?’

He let his hands fall and turned towards her—

‘It is true, Ernestine. God, in whom you believe, has brought this judgment on me.’

‘Then come as she wishes—come quickly—she is expiring.’

He looked towards Annie, and saw that it was so indeed. Her head had fallen back, her shadowy blue eyes were partly hidden beneath the white lids, and over her parted lips the breath was coming each moment fainter, like the heaving tide falling ever lower and lower on the shore it is deserting. Lingard rushed to the bedside, and, sinking on his knees, exclaimed, ‘Rosie, forgive me—forgive!’

Slowly she turned her dim eyes with a last look of life towards him, and, with great difficulty, lifting one thin white hand, she let it fall on his head as if in token

of pardon and blessing. It rested there for a few more awful moments, during which her dying breath still sighed into the silence; then suddenly a light broke over her face like morning on the distant hills; with one low sob the spirit passed away from the worn and weary frame, and Annie Brook was beyond the reach of mortal ill.

CHAPTER X.

CHARITY SUFFERETH LONG, AND IS KIND.

YES! Annie Brook was beyond the reach of mortal ill, but not so Ernestine Courtenay. The scorn of the world could never more bring the flush of shame to that cold white cheek, nor could its cruel hate or deadly love rend the poor heart that lay so still beneath the hand of death; but life, with its terrible capacity for suffering, was strong in the sensitive palpitating frame of her who now beside that quiet corpse was entering on a silent agony which could only terminate with actual existence on the earth.

Thorold came hurriedly into the room, almost immediately after Annie breathed her last, and Lingard, hearing his step, rose up at once from his kneeling posture by the bed, and walked quickly to the door; but there he paused for a moment, and, turning round, he looked on Ernestine. Their gaze met, and though not a word was spoken, both knew that it was an eternal farewell which was passing between them; yet he saw

there was not one shade of reproach in the sweet eyes that were looking their last on all that made life dear, —only mournful regret and anguish, which he rightly judged was far more for his sin than her own sorrow. He could not bear the sight; a spasm of pain contracted his features; and hastily turning from the room, he rushed down stairs, and Ernestine knew she would never look upon his face again. Thorold was astonished at his abrupt departure, for he had heard from Mrs. Berry that Mr. Lingard, finding Miss Courtenay was detained to so late an hour, had come to escort her home; but when he turned and caught a glimpse of the dumb agony on Ernestine's face as she flung herself down by the dead body, with her hands clasped above her head, he understood it all. Very gently he asked her a few questions as to Annie's last moments, and she lifted up her head and answered him in a strange half-stifled voice; then he bid her take comfort in the thought that she had been able to carry out her mission to the last; and that she might hope the poor lost wanderer, now lying before them with so quiet a smile on her pale face, was even then at peace at her pitying Saviour's feet.

A faint light stole into Ernestine's mournful eyes, as he thus said the only words which could have given

her comfort at that moment, and she looked up gratefully to him, but did not speak. Then he asked her if she wished any one to assist her in performing the last offices for Annie. She softly answered, 'No.' He saw that indeed it was best for her at that moment to be alone with the dead, so he quietly withdrew, giving Mrs. Berry many directions for her comfort, when she should have finished the last act of charity to her whom she had so long sought, and found at last, at the cost of all her own happiness on earth.

The glad sunshine of the early summer morning was pouring into the room when Ernestine began to compose the limbs of the dead, and spread over them the fair white linen, type of the wedding-garment, which she trusted even this poor erring child might win from the tender mercy of the sinless Lord ; and, as she saw that a new day had begun, a strange feeling took possession of her, as if she herself had died with Annie—died for ever to the sweet life of the past, with its love and hope and joy, and as if the whole earth would henceforth be for her cold and dark as the grave, whither that dead form must descend. She seemed to be acting out in a mournful drama her own future existence, as she performed her last duties to the corpse. When she closed the eyes she felt that her own also could look no more on all that

had been beauty and brightness to her in this world ; and as she crossed the hands, in token of meek submission, on the lifeless breast, so she felt must she, in calm resignation, accept the death of hope and gladness in her heart, and only wait with Annie for the blessed resurrection, when the sorrows of earth would vanish like fleeting vapours in the light of the eternal day.

Very quietly she went through her task ; only at times the bitter pain at her heart found vent in a choking sob. With a lingering tenderness she combed out Annie's fair hair till it fell like a golden shroud over the lifeless form, then she took a lovely white camellia from her dress, which Lingard had given her the night before, when, radiant with happiness, she had hurried to meet him, and laid it upon Annie's breast. She knew she had done with the flowers of life for ever. When all was finished she kissed the marble brow, and, kneeling down, lifted up her whole soul in one earnest supplication, that she might be able to turn the love she still must feel for Lingard, while life lasted, into one long unwearyed prayer for him, that when he too should be a silent corpse upon the bed of death, his soul might win forgiveness from his God, as she trusted this his victim had ; then she bowed her head on her hands, and said

in a low, calm voice, 'Now, Lord, I am thine alone!' and so remained motionless, as if her spirit too had passed away to the land of perfect rest.

She found Mrs. Berry waiting anxiously for her appearance, when at last she left the death-chamber. Thorold had desired that Miss Courtenay should not be disturbed, and the nurse had not ventured to disobey; but now, as she came forward to meet the lady, she started back, as much appalled as if, to use her own words, she had seen a ghost. And truly Ernestine might almost have passed for one, with her white dress shining in the morning light, her face perfectly colourless, and a shadowy look in her eyes, as if they saw nothing near, but were gazing into some far-distant realm, unseen by others. When Mrs. Berry spoke to her there was a peculiar quietude in her manner, which never again left her; it was as though nothing which could now befall her would have power to wound her any more, and she were merely passing through the world, with her hopes and heart elsewhere.

'My dear, dear lady, you do look so ill! what ever can I do for you?' said Mrs. Berry. 'The carriage is waiting for you; but I am sure you are not fit to go home.'

'I am quite well, dear nurse. Don't distress yourself

about me. But I must go; I have nothing more to do here now.'

'But you have had no rest, my dear lady, and not a morsel of food.'

'It will not hurt me.' What indeed could hurt her now! 'I do not want anything, dear nurse. Mr. Thorold will help you with all arrangements for the funeral. I shall be present at it myself.'

'Indeed, ma'am, you are not able for it; you don't know how ill you look.'

'It will not hurt me,' she still repeated, and quietly, though with a feeble step, she went into the carriage, and drove through the streets as if all were unreal around her, and the people whom she saw but moving shadows in a dream.

That same day, as Ernestine expected, a packet was brought to her from Hugh Lingard. It contained her letters, and a few little things she had given him, all arranged with a degree of tender care, which touched her very much, and there was a note which contained only these words:—

'I know that I must never look upon your face again. I know that my presence would henceforth be utterly insupportable to you; nor could I now myself endure

to link my guilty life with yours, so innocent and holy. Ernestine, you will believe me that I never for one moment guessed the truth, or dreamt of the horrible vengeance that was pursuing me, while you, in your guileless charity, were tracking out the unhappy girl who, best in all the world, could teach you what I was. You always spoke of Annie Brook, and I knew only Rosie Brown. But I did know, from the first moment that your intense desire to save her revealed to me the depths of your pure soul, that I was totally unfit to be your life's companion ; that you would have shrunk from me with horror had you known my previous history ; and that I was in truth cruelly deceiving you in suffering you to bind yourself to such an one as I am. The honourable course would have been to have given you up, even if I could not have brought myself to tell you the hateful cause of so dreadful a necessity ; but, Ernestine, my one, my only love, you were dearer to me than words can ever tell ; the very light of my life. I could not part with you ; rather every word you said, which showed how mistaken you were in your opinion of me, made me long to hasten the time when no such discovery as this could have torn you from me, though it might have broken your heart. But your God has taken care of you. My own deeds have risen

up between us, and thrust us asunder for ever. I acknowledge the retribution to be just. My only love, farewell!

HUGH LINGARD.'

A postscript merely stated that by the time Ernestine received this letter he would have left England. And so terminated her life's bright dream, in a darkness which had no ray of light, save in the hope that by the wreck of her own mortal happiness, she had secured eternal peace for Annie Brook.

For the next few days Ernestine moved about at her usual occupations, calm and still, speaking very little, and seeming to hear and see nothing of what was passing round her. She told Lady Beaufort quietly, that the engagement between herself and Hugh Lingard was broken off by mutual consent, and bore without a word the storm of indignant and astonished remarks with which the various members of the family met her announcement; still less did she heed the varying reports as to the cause of the rupture which were circulated in society. In her late experience she had gone far above and beyond all that the world could do, either for or against her. But her physical strength was not proof against the shock she had undergone, and the long mental strain which had preceded it. She came

home from Annie Brook's funeral chilled and shivering, though it was a warm summer day. In the night, fever came on, and for some weeks she was too ill to be conscious of anything that had befallen her, or was yet to come.

In the long hours of convalescence, however, all the past came back upon her, with the deep lessons it had to teach as to the true use and meaning of the life which, for so brief a time, is intrusted to each one of us, to make it in its fruits, an eternal blessing or a curse.

Slowly she turned her wearied eyes to the future that might yet stretch out before her many years, and forced herself to consider how she meant to spend it. It was now about the time when her marriage would have been over, and Lady Beaufort had always intended after that event to take her two daughters to spend the winter in Rome; and she still adhered to her plan, though she would have been quite willing to let her niece accompany her. This, however, was what Ernestine felt she could not do. She knew that if she went with her aunt and cousins she would have to enter on a round of gaieties, for which the events of the last few months had totally unfitted her; and, besides, she felt she had arrived at a turning-point in her life, which had changed the aspect of the whole world, and her own


position in it altogether. The natural happiness to which a woman looks in the ties of wife and mother could never now be hers. Hugh Lingard had alone possessed her love, and she knew that she could love none other while existence lasted. The life of mere society and amusement had always failed to satisfy her, and now the very thought of it was utter weariness to her ; for her recent experiences had opened up to her a glimpse of the vast universe of sin and sorrow round her, and she longed with all her heart to make her life of some use to those who so sorely needed help, feeling that it would be only too short for all she should like to do for others in her course through the world. She thought of what she had seen in the gaol and the workhouse, and of the terrible necessities of that unhappy class to whom Lois and Annie had belonged ; and it seemed to her as if her difficulty lay only in a choice among so many, who needed all that she or any one could do for them. She had a sufficient income to live independently in any way she pleased ; but, while she was revolving many different plans in her mind, she found the whole matter suddenly taken out of her hands, and a claim of so urgent a nature made upon her, that she could have no hesitation in giving up all else to it.

Tidings arrived from India of a terrible accident which had befallen Colonel Courtenay and his wife.

The very day after their arrival at Calcutta, he had been driving her out in an open phaeton, with a pair of fiery horses, little used to harness. Something had frightened them at the top of a steep ascent. They had run off at a tremendous pace, and had dashed the carriage against a stone wall at the bottom. It had been smashed to pieces, and both Colonel and Mrs. Courtenay were thrown out to a considerable distance. When persons came to their assistance, it was found that the young and beautiful Mrs. Courtenay was quite dead ; she had fallen with great violence on a heap of stones, in such a manner as to cause instant death, while her husband had received a blow on the head which rendered him completely insensible. He had after a time regained consciousness ; but there had been some fatal injury to the brain, and though his life was in no danger, he had subsided into a state of hopeless imbecility. Of course, all that his friends in India could do for him, was to send him home at once to England, under the care of a doctor ; and at the time when the letter reached Ernestine, her brother might be expected to arrive any day.

She was almost overwhelmed at the tidings. The thought of her proud, handsome brother, stricken down in the very prime of life and strength, and changed into a helpless idiot, was very terrible ; but more dreadful far was the recognition of the awful judgment of God, which had taken from him the power to repent of the evil deeds which had made him a murderer, while life was still spared to drag on perhaps for many hopeless years. And Julia, the gay, brilliant girl, for whose sake he had driven Lois to her death—a few short weeks only had he been allowed to look on her with pride and pleasure as his wife, and then she was suddenly withdrawn into the Unseen, while the world was still all in all to her. Ernestine bowed her head before the justice of God, as she remembered the words, —‘ When Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.’

Her own course was plain. Woman-like, her deep love for her brother had never faltered, even when she knew him to be least worthy of it ; and now her whole heart yearned towards him in his hopeless imbecility. She was his nearest living relation, and none cared to dispute her claim to take the sole care of him ; and so it came to pass that Ernestine Courtenay once more took her way to Seamount, feeling as if a lifetime of bitter



experience had passed over her head since last she looked upon its quiet waters.

She was only just in time to go on board the steamer to meet her brother, before the passengers disembarked, and, sad as her anticipations had been, she almost reeled beneath the shock of his first appearance, as he was led up to her by the doctor and a servant: a broken-down, prematurely old man, with the tremor of a sort of palsy in all his limbs, and a face from which every spark of intelligence had fled; the eyes weak and glazed; the under lip drooping, and the helpless, useless hands hanging down on either side, as his attendants held him up by the arms. When Ernestine had recovered herself sufficiently to call him by his name, and try to attract his attention, he stared vacantly at her, without the smallest recognition in his eyes, and began in a querulous feeble voice to ask for his dinner; he wanted his dinner—why could he not have it?

‘He has just dined,’ said the doctor; but ceaselessly he continued to mumble out the same request while they conveyed him on shore, and the last word Ernestine heard, when she had seen him laid comfortably in bed, was the repetition of the same demand.

They had put him to bed early, as eating and sleeping were his sole occupations, and Ernestine, being thus

left at liberty, went out in the twilight to visit the grave of Lois Brook. All was unchanged since she stood there last, save that a few pale autumn flowers had sprung up over the last resting-place of the suicide. But what centuries of mental life for her and for others had passed away since then! The doom of eternity itself had been fixed for most of those who were dear to her. With a deep sigh she looked at the inscription she had placed on the headstone to mark the grave,

L. B.

Veniam supplicat,

in the hope that her unhappy brother might one day himself awake to penitence, and come to that spot to seek forgiveness over the ashes of his victim. And now, was he not already as much beyond the power of repentance as if he too lay cold and still beneath the turf with Lois? He was dead now, even as she was, to moral responsibility and consciousness; and not till the last day of awful revelation could he know the dread results of his sin in the fate of Lois Brook. And this was the brother who had been her pride and joy so long; to whom she had been wont to look up with such love and admiration! Then she thought of Reginald, no less dear, her dead mother's darling, the refined, intellectual, enthusiastic boy, who used to confide to her his dreams

of exalted goodness and noble service in the cause of Christ. Gone was his brief life as the memory of a dream; and over his grave too there hung a gloom which never would have rested on it but for one man's presumptuous tampering with that faith, in others, which he had lost for himself. Reginald too was the victim of a fellow-creature.

With the remembrance of Annie came the never-dying anguish of the thought, that the hand which had driven her to her dishonoured grave, was the one on which she herself had hoped to lean, throughout the life that now must pass away uncheered by human love or joy. And Lingard,—how did her heart die within her as she thought of him, and of her own false faith in the goodness and holiness which he had never possessed!

Her head drooped lower and lower as these dark images rose one by one before her; and her soul quailed beneath the mournful mystery of that unnatural cruelty, which makes human beings prey one upon another like wild beasts thirsting for each other's blood. The same life given to each, so brief, so momentous, so full of peril and temptation and suffering; the same eternity, with the awful uncertainty of its blessedness or woe; the same death, hastening with swift feet down the path which each must tread; and yet the horrible spectacle

is hourly seen of men driving one another down to hell, —corrupting, torturing each other! Who would not sink beneath the weight of such dark truths, were it not for the One Vision on which the saddest, most bewildered eyes, may yet ever rest in peace,—the Cross of Calvary, where hangs the Light of the world, shining through all the gloom and tempests of the ages as they pass, and where all who have been wounded by sin or treachery may find their healing, if they will.

On Ernestine's soul that vision rose like the sun on the blackness of night, and to the inexhaustible love that there burns on for ever and ever, she felt she could leave the living and the dead alike.

In the course of a fortnight, Ernestine was established with her brother George in a country-house she had taken for him, and her long attendance began on the clouded existence which was to outlive her own. She soon found, however, that the care she bestowed on him, though absolutely essential to prevent his being neglected or ill-used by his attendants, could not fill up either her time or her thoughts; and she was very thankful to be enabled now to carry out a plan which had been in her mind ever since Annie Brook had escaped from the Penitentiary. Her interest in that miserable class of outcasts had been far too strongly

excited ever to die away, and she had greatly longed to try the experiment of providing a refuge for them, on a different system from that which prevailed in most Homes, and which might at least serve as a preparatory shelter for them, until they were sufficiently advanced in real repentance to be able to accept the corrective discipline already in use. She gave up the whole of her fortune, except the small sum necessary for her personal expenses, to this object, and had soon prepared a suitable house near her brother's, which she took care should be surrounded with large gardens and grounds, so as to afford the means for ample out-door exercise and amusement. A kind-hearted, gentle lady, who had been left a childless widow, without the means of living, was, by Thorold's advice, placed in charge of it, with Mrs. Berry to assist her, and one or two other simple, kindly women, who had no theories as to rigid discipline or rule, but willingly agreed to take, for their one principle of action, the endeavour, by love and gentleness, to lead the wanderers they sheltered, to a perception of that everlasting love of which they knew absolutely nothing.

Ernestine had learnt from Thorold to believe that the chief mistake made in most other Refuges, was the treatment of these lawless impulsive beings as if they were already in reality penitents, which it is not too

much to say they never are. Many motives may lead them to seek a shelter, which have no foundation in sorrow for sin, or even in resignation of it; and when, therefore, they are placed under a system of conventual strictness and high moral pressure, which could only be advisable for persons deeply remorseful for a shameless life, it is inevitable that in many cases the result should be a failure, which leaves them to fall back into their guilt.

To grant these poor outcasts a simple shelter from evil, unencumbered by needless rules and constraints, and to strive to show them the goodness of their Father in heaven reflected in the love and compassion of His creatures, was Ernestine's first object; and when their health and spirits had improved under a few months' care and kindness, she tried gently to influence for good each individual separately, dealing with every one according to her special temperament, instead of placing the whole number *en masse* under a machinery of discipline, enforced by punishments, as is too often done elsewhere. She received all who came or were sent to her, without requiring certificates of health, or otherwise raising obstacles to their admission; indeed, it seemed to her, that to take them when they were ill, and nurse them through their sickness, was one of the best

means of gaining an influence over them. If an application was made when the house was full, she found a home for them elsewhere till she could take them in ; but she would rather have sacrificed anything than let one be refused a refuge who could be induced to seek for it. She provided work for them ; but when their shattered nerves or hysterical tendencies made a monotonous employment impossible or irksome, they were free to roam, without constraint, through the grounds ; and a considerable part of their ordinary occupation was the care of the garden, which afforded them both fresh air and amusement. Often they were taken a walk over the breezy common at the back of the house, which was too far from any town to render this liberty dangerous as an inducement to escape ; but Ernestine would have thought it a less evil to lose one or two in this way, than to subject the whole of them to the feeling of confinement and imprisonment, which they are so unable to bear. With Thorold's help she was able to make arrangements for the emigration of some of them every year to a distant colony, where situations were found for them, and where, in many cases, they married respectably. Not a few of them found their last home under her care, and met the early death, which

so often overtakes them, with her arms round them, and her prayers ascending for them. She was able to spend a great part of every day at the Home, where her appearance always made a general festival; and though she had many disappointments and sorrows, as the inevitable result of thus charging herself with the care of beings so wayward and so demoralized, yet did the work often bring to her, in the course of her patient life, the sweetest, purest joy which ever can be known on earth,—the hope that she had saved a deathless soul, and brought back to the feet of her dear Lord the wandering and the lost, for whom He died.

Lois and Annie Brook lie cold and silent in the grave. That which man has made them they must remain, till the voice of the archangel calls them to meet their destroyers before the throne of God. But there are thousands like unto them in this land of ours,—a multitude such as no man can number, in whom the breath of life yet lingers, for whom the immutable fiat has not yet been spoken; and there are others scattered thick on the earth as flowers in the spring, children young and pure, sent into this world to be made fit for the Paradise of saints, who we know shall all too

swiftly be made like unto the lost in their dishonoured graves, if justice and mercy continue to veil their faces in sight of this deadly plague as now they do.

Shall it be ever thus? Shall this dread evil slay its thousands and ten thousands yearly, unheeded by those to whom legislative power is given, or by the no less influential rulers of public opinion, while still it ever cries to God for the vengeance that shall surely come at last? Shall its hideous wickedness still be ignored, glossed over, or made light of, as regards the destroyers, while the destroyed are branded with dishonour, and driven to deeper evil, by the blackest injustice that ever disgraced a Christian land? Is it to be always so, that in the realm which calls Christ, master, the crime He denounced in awful terms is to be held by men, and *for men*, as scarce a sin? Are the haunts and centres of infamy always to be suffered to exist openly, and still allure souls to destruction in the face of day? Will a time never come when this matter shall be tried by God's estimate of right and wrong, and not by man's; when the measure of His justice shall alone regulate the balance of comparative guilt; when His standard of holiness shall fix the place it is to hold for all alike, in the world's code of moral and spiritual evil? Would that such a

time might be foreseen even in hope alone! for till that day comes, this great Empire may advance in knowledge, in wisdom, in power, and in science, but it can never really become that which even now it claims to be—
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